
BROKKEN ROAD
THIS BROKKEN ROAD
LYNDA COX
ABAGAIL ELDAN
BROKKEN ARROW
ABAGAIL ELDAN
BROKKEN ROAD
ROMANCE
BROKKEN REDEEMED
ABAGAIL ELDAN
BROKKEN BROTHER
ABAGAIL ELDAN
BROKKEN TALES
FOUR NOVELLAS
ABAGAIL ELDAN

Brokken Tales
Brokken Road Romances

Four Novellas:
This Brokken Road: Prequel
Brokken Arrow
Brokken Brother
Brokken Redeemed

Abagail Eldan

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Scripture taken from the King James Version.

Any discrepancies in the timeline between *Brokken Arrow* and the other novels in *The Brokken Road* series are entirely my doing. Working with several other authors and attempting to keep an unbroken timeline for when characters arrived in our fictional little town in Texas proved to be a challenge. In a few places, that timeline needed to be twisted a bit.

There are also minor characters in this series who appear in several of the stories. As with the timeline, there may be discrepancies in how those minor characters are portrayed from book to book.

All covers designed by Carpe Librum Book Design, owned by cover designer, Evelyne Labelle.

Visit our Brokken Western Historical Readers Group on Facebook and Facebook page Brokken Road Western Historical Romances.

Dedication

Brokken Tales is dedicated to my fellow Brokken Writers.

Thank you for all your hard work!

This Brokken Road: Abigail and Deborah

Chapter One

"Stop that, both of you." Abigail Bailey stood on the porch of the home she once shared with the man she promised to love until death. Death had done its part, aided by a war only fools and Yankees wanted. "So help me, Calvin and Devon, I'm going to blister your backsides if you two don't stop this instant."

Both Calvin Meyers and Devon Peters halted a less than well-aimed punch.

"He called my pa a traitor," Calvin said and shoved Devon.

Devon returned the favor. "He was. He was a low-down, dirty Reb."

With those words, the fight was on again.

Abigail realized the futility of shouting at the pint-sized combatants. She marched down the stairs, avoiding the broken step.

Broken roads. Broken town. Broken lives. Broken hearts. Broken dreams. The litany of all that was broken ticked off with each step she took.

Calvin's back was nearest, and Abigail seized his collar, pulling him away from Devon. Devon's nape drew her other hand. Once she had a firm grip on both boys, Abigail allowed some of her frustration and anger to vent by giving them a solid shake.

"More than half the men in this town were what you called a 'low-down, dirty Reb.' Do you wish to call my husband, Sam, a traitor, Devon Isaiah Peters?" She punctuated the question with another hard shake. "Or perhaps there's something else you'd like to call those men who wore the grey?"

"No, ma'am." Devon had the good graces to appear contrite.

"At least my pa ain't ever gonna be a scalawag or a carpetbagger." The smug self-righteousness in Calvin's voice mimicked the same tone she'd heard from many adults in town.

Add broken children to the litany.

Abigail didn't spare Calvin the same treatment she administered to Devon. "For your information, young man, I come from a family of Yankees. Do I look like a carpetbagger or scalawag to you?"

Calvin shook his head, as chagrinned as Devon.

"I didn't think so. Now, both of you, shake hands, apologize, and

stop fighting."

Neither child looked at the other. They also didn't offer to shake hands. Abigail added another shake to their scruffs. "Shake hands and apologize."

"Ain't gonna shake with no scalawag."

"Won't apologize to no Reb."

"Lord have mercy!" Abigail increased the pressure of her fingers. The two boys didn't need a scolding. These two simply repeated the angry and ugly words they heard from those who should know better. Instead, several adults warranted a good tongue-lashing. Equally as dismaying to her was how thin the little combatants felt under her hands. She knew boys their age often spurted in growth, leaving them slender, but this went beyond that. "Either you two shake hands and stop fighting a war that ended almost two years ago or I'll tell Sheriff Victoria to arrest the both of you. Won't that look grand, your mothers having to get the both of you out of jail?"

"What you gonna have us arrested for?" Devon's contrition vanished as fully as hope for Southern independence had in a little town somewhere in Virginia.

"Being incorrigible delinquents."

"In...in...incorri...what's that word mean?" Calvin squirmed to break free.

"It means you're beyond correcting." Abigail glanced up the main street. A knot twisted in her chest and tightened. Victoria gestured wildly at Martin Davis. Davis, for his part, backed farther and farther away from the *de facto* sheriff of Brokken, Texas. "There's Sheriff Victoria. Do I need to call her over here or are you two going to shake hands and stop fighting with one another?"

The appearance of Victoria brought about Abigail's desired result.

Devon spit into his palm and thrust his dirty hand out to Calvin. "I promise I won't call your pa a traitor no more."

Calvin hesitated, cleared his throat, spit into his palm and shook hands with Devon. "I won't call you no scalawag, either."

Abigail released both boys. "Don't let me catch either of you fighting again."

"No, ma'am." As if their shirt-tails had caught fire, the boys ran from her, down the dusty main street. Their pace quickened as they passed Martin Davis and Victoria.

She shook her head. Whatever Victoria was saying to Davis, he

was having none of it. For every step backwards he managed, Victoria advanced. It was one of two things the sheriff—heaven help them all, Brokken had a female sheriff because so many men had never returned—was haranguing Davis for. Either Victoria was trying to wheedle information from Davis the man didn't have, or—No, only one thing got Victoria that worked up.

Abigail lifted her skirts. She loved Victoria, but there were times tact was not her best friend's strong suit. Victoria had a habit of shooting first—often from the hip—and asking questions later. Her persistent questioning of Davis about her late husband, Jonathan, was just another manner of Victoria's shooting, using words as a weapon.

"Vic."

Victoria wheeled to her, the revolver she always wore drawing Abigail's gaze. The tin star pinned to her blouse wasn't so disconcerting as that heavy revolver. Sam would have said it wasn't exactly a pea-shooter. Her heart ached with the bittersweet memory of Sam's deep voice remarking on Victoria's talent with both revolver and rifle, and while the skill was impressive, only a man like Jonathan could have kept Victoria in check. Tight reins and sharp spurs had been his exact words.

"What is it?" The curtness to her friend's words caused Abigail's heart to sink. Victoria had been interrogating Martin again. The man obviously didn't have any information about Jonathan, and yet she persisted. Her friend's lack of knowledge increased the sharpness of her tone. Not knowing how or when her husband died—if he even had or if he was one of the men who just chose for whatever reason to never return—gnawed at Victoria's insides and emerged with mounting frustration, as Abigail well knew.

"Calvin and Devon got into another fight. Maybe, it's time for you to have a talk with them."

"Why me?"

"Because you're the sheriff, and if you threaten to toss them in jail, they might think twice before they start throwing punches at one another." Abigail spared Davis a smile and nodded a greeting to him. She caught Victoria's elbow, forestalling the sheriff's escape.

Davis touched the brim of his stained slouch hat. "If you'll excuse me, I gotta be on my way."

"Of course, Mr. Davis." The man always fidgeted when Abigail was near him, twitching and jerking as if he was a long-tailed cat in

a room full of rocking chairs. “Would you please give my regards to Jane? I missed seeing her in church.”

The man looked to the dusty road at their feet. “She wasn’t feeling good. Ain’t never seen a woman be this sick just from being in a delicate condition.”

The knots in Abigail’s chest tightened. “If you don’t object, I’ll come out later today. I have a few tinctures that will help with that.”

Davis scuffed a worn boot toe in the road. He stared up the road, across the street, and back to the yellow dust. Anywhere but at her. Victoria jabbed her elbow at Abigail, and she responded with a tightening of her hand on her friend’s arm. In the strained stillness, a mourning dove softly cooed. Sam called them rain crows because often their cooing meant rain was coming. Heaven knew, they needed the rain. The winter had been drier than anyone could remember. Finally, Davis broke the silence. “That backwoods witchcraft of yours ...”

“They’re the same tinctures Sam would have offered her if he were still with us.” Abigail forced a smile and carefully enunciated each word, ruthlessly quelling any trace of her backwoods accent. “I don’t use any medicines that Sam didn’t approve of.”

“Do what you want.” Davis offered a curt nod and walked away.

After he was out of earshot, Abigail turned to Victoria. “You were interrogating him again, weren’t you?”

The stubborn thrust of Victoria’s chin provided all the answer she needed. Anger wouldn’t help. It seldom did with Victoria. Abigail opted for a softer approach, though her first instinct was to rail at her friend. “Vic, the war’s been over for more than a year. If Jonathan was coming home—”

“Don’t you say it.” Victoria wrenched her arm loose. “Don’t you say Jonathan isn’t coming home. He said he’d be back.”

Just as Sam had promised he would stay safe and return. Broken promises could be added to her continuing litany. “I won’t say that. But, Vic, you have to accept that Mr. Davis doesn’t know anything about Jonathan, other than what he’s told you. Continuing to question him won’t give you the answers you need.”

Victoria’s lips thinned, and she craned her head over her shoulder. “I’m not going to threaten to throw those two boys in the jail for fighting. Making them stop is Millie and Laura’s job. They’re their mothers.”

“That’s ripe, Victoria English.” Abigail tugged on the tin star pinned to her friend’s blouse. She duly noted her friend’s less than artful attempt to change the subject but willingly allowed Victoria to steer away from the painful matter of Jonathan’s failure to return to Brokken. “Those boys are insisting on continuing a war that should have never been fought and you won’t use this badge to try to bring peace to this town.”

Victoria slapped her hand away. “Don’t you tell me how to do my job.”

“It’s not your job.” Abigail took a step closer to her friend, so she was nose to nose with her. “That’s part of the problem in this town. We’re all doing jobs none of us ever wanted to do and some of us aren’t qualified to do.”

“Are you saying I’m not qualified to be this town’s sheriff?”

The sudden chill had nothing to do with the breeze stirring small dust devils in the road. In for a penny, in for a pound, Abigail reasoned. “Capable with a revolver or a rifle, you’re more than qualified. But you have a tendency to fly off the handle. The only time you really keep a firm grip on that hot-headedness is when you’re proving to someone you can outshoot them.”

Victoria leaned in and Abigail’s spine stiffened. She was not going to let Victoria intimidate her.

“If you want to talk about being qualified to do a job that some of us shouldn’t be doing, at least I can read the writing on a wanted poster. Your schooling fell a little short to be a doctor, didn’t it?”

Other than Sam, Victoria was the only person who knew her ability to read had been dwarfed by the youngest of students when she first arrived in Brokken. The nights spent sitting next to Sam, struggling to read anything beyond a first primer, seared through Abigail’s memory. He’d been so patient, so gentle, and even knew exactly when to tease her or not as she stumbled over a word. For Victoria to throw that former shortcoming in her face felt as painful and stunning as a hard slap. She swallowed the large lump blocking her throat and stumbled several steps backward. “I’ve never claimed to be a doctor. Can you say you’ve never claimed to be the sheriff?”

Chapter Two

"I'm sorry, Abby. That was just cruel of me." Victoria closed the distance and reached for Abigail's hand.

Abigail jerked away, turning her back to Victoria in the same movement. Just another example of Victoria shooting from the hip and not worrying about what she might hit when the weapon fired. "I have to get those tinctures and see Jane."

"Abby, don't walk away angry with me. Please. I'm sorry."

Abigail paused, let her eyes shut for a brief second, and quelled the angry words she longed to heap on Victoria's head. She opted for allowing the backwoods drawl she fought so hard to unlearn tint her words. "I gotta go see Jane."

"Abby."

She recognized the pleading tone. Usually, she softened and smiled and pulled her friend into her arms for a warm hug. She couldn't find the fortitude this time. This time, Victoria's words cut too deep. Abigail continued to walk away.

"If it will make you happy, I'll go talk to those boys and their mothers."

The tight rein Abigail maintained on her temper snapped. She spun around to Victoria, still allowing that hated drawl to deeply color each syllable. "It ain't 'bout makin' me happy." She drew in hard on her anger, subduing the drawl. "It's about saving what's left of Brokken. Haven't you seen what's going on in this town? That...that blasted war is long over, but we've got families here still fighting it. And we've got folks who've just been going through the motions since the day they got word about a son, or a brother. Or a husband."

Victoria's mouth dropped open.

That last about husbands had been almost as cruel as Victoria's taunt about her ability to read when she first arrived in Brokken, but Abigail was past caring. She gestured expansively at the dying town. "We've got families who lost sons, or fathers, or brothers and who have no way to make a living and keep food on the table. We've got children calling each other traitors and scalawags and heaven only knows what else they've heard from their parents.

Because of the taxes the Federals are levying for so-called Reconstruction, we've got what's left of some families that can't even keep a roof over their heads pulling up stakes."

Victoria continued to gape at her like a fish out of water. Abigail lifted her skirts and marched back to her friend. "And you think this is about making me happy? Victoria Regina English, sometimes I think you're as blind as old man Fenton."

"What do you expect me to do? I can't change people's minds."

"You want to be the sheriff?" Abigail poked her finger into her friend's chest, punctuating each word. "Then, *be the sheriff*. Make them stop fighting. Do what you're supposed to do if you really are a sheriff."

"How do you propose I do that?" Victoria's color heightened. "Or did you forget how high emotions ran?"

"The war is over. The South lost. The Confederates have just got to accept that and hope the Unionists..." All the fight drained away from Abigail. In the sudden silence, the rain crow cooed, announcing coming rains. "We have to be Texans again, not Confederates or Unionists. Otherwise, Brokken will never survive."

"Brokken's dying." Victoria's shoulders rounded. "Half the businesses in town are closed. I've got tax notices on my desk for two of the bigger spreads outside of town that we all know can't be paid, which means some carpetbagger is going to pay the back taxes and move in. Father took food out to Livy and her kids, again. And, Davis is taking his wife and leaving."

"What?" It was Abigail's turn to gape. Livy and those four little ones, the youngest barely two, hadn't been able to make anything grow on their small homestead. That Pastor Grisson had taken more food out to the family came as no surprise. Davis, on the other hand... "When did you learn this? He can't leave. We need him here."

"That's what I was trying to tell him." Victoria fiddled with the badge pinned to her blouse. "When you take that medicine to Jane, maybe you can talk some sense into him. I sure couldn't."

The nervous twisting of the badge told her Victoria wasn't being entirely honest about the interrupted conversation with Davis. Confronting her again would also solve nothing. "Why don't you come with me, Vic? Maybe the two of us together..."

"I don't think he wants to talk to me." Victoria backed away. "I'll go find your miscreants and have a few words with them."

A rain crow called again, answered by another. Abigail made her way back to her home. She looked over her shoulder at the small town. The general store still had its doors open, but for how long? They couldn't continue to extend credit to people who had so little to their name. Much like the town itself, the shelves of the general store were slowly emptying. Not enough Yankee gold to restock, and until the train tracks were repaired and once more laid over the line in Louisiana, it cost too much to freight supplies into town. The latest schedule on the railroad line reopening was sometime in the next month.

She sank onto a step of the porch. Maybe, she should think about leaving, too. She had no family here, no deep ties to this loamy soil. She and Sam had come here, looking for that better life. That was almost ten years, four miscarriages, two stillborn babies, and one husband ago.

Abigail blinked away the sudden threatening tears and shook her head, angry with herself. Wallowing in self-pity never did a body good. When word came of Sam's death at Camp Chase after his capture she promised she would stay on to take care of her friends until a new doctor could be convinced to come to Brokken.

And one of those people needed her help, now.

She took hold of the railing on the steps and pulled herself to her feet. A pause to brush the dust from her dark skirt gave her another few moments to contemplate the dying town nestled into the rolling hills and pine stands. The winter rains hadn't come, and all was a desiccated, yellow-brown. Lord, they needed rain. While collecting young shoots the day before, the tinder-dry condition of the pine stands and the oak groves gave her deep pause. One spark...

Abigail froze, looking at the town again. *A spark.* Something to light a fire under the people of Brokken. How many times had she witnessed how thickly vegetation returned after a fire? A nebulous idea began to form. Was she or was she not a healer? Brokken was broken, hurting, and in need of a healing touch. And the men who had lost their families in the War—perhaps Brokken could provide them a home and they, in turn, could provide the town with what it most needed.

If she could convince the other widows and Pastor Grisson to endorse the idea, it just might be the manner to heal Brokken and restore life to the small town. That's what they needed—an infusion

of life.

In the meantime, she had a sick woman to care for.



ABIGAIL PAUSED AT THE gate in the fence surrounding the small, nondescript cabin Martin Davis had built for what he hoped to be a growing family. He had taken his time with this fence, forming pickets and supports. She remembered the care that had once been taken with this place—the lush vegetable garden of green beans, peas, corn, and tubers; the small patch of grass Davis had maintained near the door; even the tiny flower beds next to the cabin Jane had so lovingly tended.

The garden plot was over-grown, the grass had gone to seed last fall and still wasn't cut back, while dank weeds choked out Jane's small flower beds. The fence was in dire need of whitewashing, and the chinking in the cabin gaped open in places. Even the gate hung askew, in desperate need of a new hinge at the bottom.

This wasn't the home of a man intending to stay.

Abigail quelled her sigh. Whether or not Davis was staying, Jane was still ill. She drew her shoulders back, shifted the small basket over her lower arm, and lifted the gate out of the dust. She marched to the door, taken slightly aback with the silence shrouding the home. Unless it had been worse than Davis let on, surely even he wouldn't have butchered out all their chickens.

A firm rapping on the door produced only a hollow echo. Abigail's heart sank. She twisted the door knob and pushed the door partially open. "Hello. Is anyone at home?"

When there wasn't an answer, not that she had been expecting one, she pushed the door fully open. Her heart sank all the way to the soles of her feet. The modest two-roomed cabin was empty. Nothing remained of the couple who once lived here—even the glass had been removed from the two small windows. The handmade table and its matching chairs were all that was left. No small wonder Davis had been so evasive earlier in town.

A jar of what appeared to be preserves held reign in the middle of that forlorn table, with a small piece of paper tucked under the jar. Abigail walked across the rough-hewn floor and sank into a chair. She dropped her basket to the freshly swept floor and looked around at the desolate little room. The late afternoon sunlight streamed through the opening where there had once been a glass

window, dust dancing in the beams. As she watched the motes twisting and shimmering, her eyes lost focus.

This wasn't just the loss of another family in Brokken. Jane had been her friend, someone who, despite Martin's derision and fear of backwoods witchcraft, had gone with her into the glades and thickets and braved the swampy areas to help her collect leaves and roots and barks. Jane made her laugh, especially in the first few weeks after Sam's capture and more importantly, after his death.

Blinking with the stinging in her eyes, she slid the jar closer to her and picked up the scrap of paper. The crude, block letters spelling out "For Abby" blurred. She sucked in a deep breath, trying to steel herself to this new loss, and the breath ended on a choking sob.

There wasn't a manner to fight this loss. Abigail crumpled the paper, holding the wad tight in one hand, while she cradled Jane's blackberry preserves to her breast and gave in to the tears. She slumped over the table, her heartbroken cries filling the empty space.

Not sure how much time had passed before she regained control of her emotions, Abigail finally wiped her face dry. The light entering the cabin had shifted, the rays longer and red as molten steel. The thought crossed her mind the rain crows had been wrong. There would be no rain overnight.

She picked up her basket, settled the jar of preserves in its depths, carefully smoothed out the simple note and secured it in the basket for safekeeping. If she remembered correctly, there was a simple hand pump behind the cabin. As hot as she felt and as much as her eyes burned, her face must be red and marred with the aftermath of her crying jag.

Long shadows filled the pine thickets. The usual chirping of the birds fell silent with her approach to the pump. Ghostly fingers trailed along her spine. Abigail paused, peering into the dark shadows, unable to suppress the thought she was being watched. A slow scan of the thickets didn't reveal anything, and Abigail shook off the chill.

A few quick pumps brought the cool water spilling from the spigot. Her large, cotton handkerchief caught the water. She wrung the fabric out, wiped her face, and pressed the still cool cloth to her hot eyes. The silence grew and the hair on the back of her neck prickled.

Lowering the cloth and making another more careful study of the shadows still didn't reveal the reason for the silence of the forest birds or why the hair stood on the back of her neck.

She wadded the cloth in her hand and froze when she caught a movement from the corner of her eye. The biggest cougar she had ever seen emerged from the undergrowth and picked its way through the brush, in complete silence, and approached a tiny stream. The cat stopped and lowered its head to the stream.

The sound of the cougar lapping water carried throughout the glade. She sucked in her breath and held herself rigid. Even though her heart raced with trepidation, Abigail couldn't deny the beauty and raw power exuding from the tawny body. White dusted the end of its muzzle and filled the inside of its constantly flicking ears.

As if it sensed her gaze, the cat slowly lifted its head and looked directly at Abigail. The black smudges over its eyes only accentuated the green depths. For a heart-stopping moment, the predator locked eyes with her. It flashed massive white fangs with a guttural snarl, twisted away from the stream, and bounded into the deeply shrouded undergrowth. Not even a twig snapped with its passage.

Abigail's knees buckled, and she struggled to remain standing. Her heart started to beat again. She sucked in a deep breath, light-headed with relief.

The short walk back to town left her feeling uneasy and repeatedly looking over her shoulder. More than once, she fought the urge to hike up her skirts and run. She'd never carried a gun, though more than once Sam had urged her to when she went into the thickets and stands to collect plants for her tinctures.

The sight of the steeple of the church slowed her steps and allowed her to breathe easier. She came to a halt on a small rise overlooking Brokken. The very last of the long, rosy rays of sunlight bathed the tiny town. Windows of the homes and businesses burned with that reflected glow, while all the structures shimmered in rose-gold. A calm settled over her as she continued to look on the town.

She lifted her chin and squared her shoulders. She was not leaving. Even if she wanted to, she couldn't. The few letters from her family back East made it clear there was nothing left to return to. Union and Confederate troops had occupied her family home more than once as battle lines had shifted, advanced, and retreated. The Till family didn't have a lot before the war. Occupying forces

made sure there was nothing. Even now, there was still nothing.

Brokken was her home. One way or another, she would gather the forces needed to save Brokken, to make it into a thriving community again.

Her plan would work. Somehow, the cougar solidified her courage, made her goal tangible.

A weight lifted, and she started down the rise into town. *Her town.*

Chapter Three

Abigail let herself into the home she had once shared with Sam. The memories here sometimes overwhelmed her. For the most part, they were good memories. Memories of the man she loved. She halted in the middle of the foyer, inhaling deeply the aroma of the mountain laurel branches she had cut that morning. A smile crossed her face with the recollection of how many times she had brought a cutting home when she and Sam had gone down to Austin, only to have the cutting die. She finally found the way to keep the cutting alive and take root was to plant it in sandy, rocky soil.

A soft sigh escaped her as she crossed the foyer into the parlor. The garish decorations here had long ago ceased to startle her, though that had taken time, too. When she and Sam first arrived in Brokken, newlywed and as poor as the proverbial church mouse, this house was the only building they could afford. No one in Brokken mentioned that before they purchased the building it had been a brothel, complete with an ornate teak and brass high-class bar.

She put her tinctures onto the shelves behind it. This bar was the one thing she and Sam had never even contemplated removing. The top itself was a single piece of teak, blacker than midnight, and its long length warped and twisted into a graceful, slow “s” curve. The craftsmanship and detail that had gone into its creation often had Abigail trailing her fingertips over the intricate inlays of three separate starburst patterns.

As she traced the largest of the starburst patterns, her cheeks heated with the recollection of Sam boosting her onto the teak...Abigail shoved those thoughts away. If she dwelled too long in the past, the pain might bring her to her knees again.

She turned her attention to the medicines and supplies. Horehound and yarrow tincture bottles appeared frighteningly low. Restocking the yarrow would mean a day’s jaunt to where she often found the plant. Once more, she resolved to dig some and plant it in her garden. It was probably the most resilient and adaptive of the plants she used for medicinal purposes.

“Did you talk to him?”

Abigail startled with Victoria's question. She turned to the open doorway of the parlor. "Do you ever knock?"

"I did." Victoria crossed the room, halted at the bar, and propped her elbows on the teak. A soft scraping noise accompanied her booted foot coming to rest on the brass footrail. "You didn't answer. Did you talk to him?"

Which was it she was being accused of not responding to—not hearing Victoria's knock or her question? Abigail picked up a bottle, shook it to mix the contents again, and then replaced it. Add licorice to her list of needed supplies. She refused to contemplate how low the supply of laudanum was.

"No, I didn't talk to Mr. Davis. He was gone…so was Jane." The lump in her throat threatened to choke Abigail again. "Everything was gone, even the glass windows. I don't know why he was in town earlier, but they're gone."

Victoria slumped closer to the bar top. "Gone?"

Abigail nodded, once, unable to force another word past the growing lump. Jane hadn't been just her friend. She, Victoria, and Jane had been inseparable. Or so she thought. A bittersweet memory came to her, of sitting on the bank of the small creek on the Davis property with both Victoria and Jane, the woods aglow with the golden light of the last hour of the day, the three of them sipping their first attempt at making hard cider and none of them willing to admit what they had was vinegar not cider. Finally, Victoria, in her shooting from the hip style, tossed the contents of her cup into the stream and announced just how horrible it was. Jane had said it was about time one of them admitted it and a small laugh started. Soon, the only way they could remain upright was to cling to one another in uncontrollable laughter, laughing until tears flowed.

"Gone?" Victoria repeated the word on a stricken whisper.

"Yes, gone." Abigail reached across the mirror-like finish of the teak and took Victoria's hands into hers. "Vic, we have to do something. You were right earlier. Brokken is dying."

"What do you have in mind?"

"I don't know." She squeezed her friend's hands once more before releasing her. "But, when I saw that cougar—"

"You saw a cougar? Where?"

"At the Davis place. When I saw that cat, I knew we must do something. The family, not even gone a day, and already that

cougar felt brave enough to come to the creek in broad daylight."

"I'll take a rifle and go wait for it there tomorrow. I'll take care of it." Victoria looked over her shoulder, as if somehow the cougar might be in the house with them.

"That's not my point." Abigail twisted the small jar of preserves still in her basket. "My point is, with people leaving Brokken, that cat felt comfortable enough to come that close to the house. It's not the only danger around here. We've both heard the rumors of deserters who are still avoiding the law and how dangerous they are. What happens when, not if, word gets out that this town is mostly women and children?"

A sullen pout twisted Victoria's lips. "Are you saying I can't defend this town from outlaws?"

Abigail slammed her open palm down on the teak bar top. "Will you stop taking everything personally? That is not what I'm saying. I'm saying you shouldn't have to. I'm saying your biggest worry should be what to cook your family for supper, and until we get more men in this town, you won't be able to cook that supper."

"I don't need a man."

Abigail knew she had pushed Victoria too hard. Her friend's shoulders tensed, her head jerked up, and the hard glitter in the depths of her eyes was much more than anger.

This stubborn refusal to accept what any sane person would have already accepted exasperated Abigail. "I know, Vic. You think he'll be back, just like Sam promised me." She struck the table again. "Face it. He's not co—"

"Don't you dare tell me again that Jonathan won't be coming back. Don't you dare!" Fury and desperation left Victoria's voice little more than a shaking, guttural growl. "Until I know for sure he's dead, I can't stop waiting for him."

"Vic, you may never know. Tullahoma happened four years ago."

Victoria's face blanched. The glitter sharpened into daggers. "No one saw him fall."

"No one saw him afterward, either." Abigail almost reached for Victoria's hands again and thought the better of it. For too long, Victoria had kept this wound open, refused to allow it to heal. "No one has seen him or heard from him in four years, Victoria."

"Until I have proof, Jonathan isn't dead."

This wasn't an open wound. This was a festering, stinking,

abscess, poisoning her friend. Sam would have told her that it had to be lanced and drained to allow for healing. The only manner to open this wound would be with words honed to scalpel sharpness and wielded with exacting precision. “Every time you asked Mr. Davis about Tullahoma, he told you the same thing. No one saw Jonathan after the battle. When they started burying the dead, so many were maimed beyond recognition. The only thing they could do was bury them and mark whether the grave was Confederate or Union. With every day that goes by, the odds become better and better that Jonathan was one of those buried in a grave marked only as a fallen son of the gray.”

Victoria clamped her lips together so tightly, white edged their shape. Her face paled until her skin resembled fragile, bleached, white-bone china. Her hands clenched into fists, the knuckles whiter than her face.

Abigail tried again. “It’s one thing to hold onto hope while there is hope to be had. It’s another to hold onto it when any reasonable person would have stopped hoping. It’s time to mourn your loss and start living, to put the past behind.”

Her friend blinked once, twice. “It must be so comforting to be able to know exactly how to tell others to feel.”

“You’re a reasonable, sane person. Put that rationale to use, Vic, and face the facts. Jonathan is dead.”

“I can’t accept it until I have proof.”

“More than anything, I wish Jonathan had come home for you. Maybe more than I wish Sam hadn’t died.” Abigail lowered her gaze to the black wood. She walked around the bar and stood next to Victoria. “Mourn for him, by all means. But, stop grieving for him and for what might have been. There is a difference.”

Victoria didn’t look at her. Her gaze remained locked on the large mirror behind the bar. Abigail shifted her sight to their reflection. She deliberately softened her voice. “Vic, you’re my dearest friend. More than that, you’re the closest thing I’ll ever have to a sister, and it cuts my heart to pieces to see you being eaten alive on the inside with this.”

“I can’t accept it.” Victoria’s face crumbled, and with an effort, she reestablished her self-control. “If I do...and, he promised me. He never broke any promise to me. Ever.”

Abigail turned to Victoria again. She hesitantly curled her fingers over her friend’s shoulder. “If he could have kept that

promise, you know he would have."

Victoria sucked in a deep breath. And another, gasping as if she'd just run a very long distance. Her shoulders rounded. Her head bowed. Her fists unclenched just long enough to grasp the silver star pinned to her blouse with one hand. "The truth is, I'm afraid he'll keep that promise."

She violently shrugged out from under Abigail's hand, spinning on a boot heel. She put several feet between them, stopping at the window to stare out.

Abigail could do no more than gape at her friend. "I thought—"

"Everyone thinks the reason I have to know if he's dead or alive is because I want him to be alive and to come back." Victoria spun around to her. The glittering harshness in her eyes returned. "I don't want him alive. But, until I know for sure, I have to assume he is. Do you understand what I'm saying, Abby?"

Abigail took one step closer and halted as the world tilted, spun, and then slowly righted. *She was afraid of Jonathan returning.* How long had Victoria kept this ugly secret? She immediately berated herself. Even if Victoria had shared it, what good would it have done? "Is that why—"

Victoria's laugh was the most bitter sound Abigail had ever heard. The glint in her friend's eyes was not anger but terror. "Why I learned to never let my guard down? Why I learned to be better than even him with a revolver or rifle? Why I shoot first and ask questions later?" Victoria's voice dropped almost to a whisper. "Why I won't let anyone get close enough to me to hurt me ever again?"

How had she managed to miss this? Four years of believing Victoria waited in vain for her husband to return, assuming it was because she loved him. And before that, she had still missed it. Victoria was married when she and Sam arrived in Brokken. "Vic, I'm sorry. I didn't see it."

"You weren't supposed to see it." She finally released her white-knuckled hold of the badge. Her shoulders rounded further, and she bent her head to the floor. "By the time you and Sam got here, I'd been married for a year. I'd already gotten really good at hiding it. And explaining away what I couldn't hide. I was clumsy. I fell down a lot of stairs."

The shame and agony radiating from her friend knifed into Abigail's heart. She took another step closer. "Why didn't you tell

someone? Why didn't you tell me?"

"What good would that have done?" Victoria's head snapped up, her eyes haunted and dark. "You couldn't stop him and if you had breathed even a word of it to anyone, the gossip would have started, and it would have been worse."

"Your father." That somehow she had missed all this sickened Abigail. "Surely you could have told him, and he would have done something. Anything."

Another bitter laugh filled the twilight shrouded room. "I did. Jonathan and I had been married about six months and...and I lost a baby because of him. I told my father and he told me I needed to be a better wife, that the Bible says wives are to submit to their husband's authority. I was always head-strong and stubborn, and I needed to learn humility and obedience."

Abigail's stomach lurched. Submit? To a man who would and did hurt her? It should have been a very cold day in an extremely warm place before she could ever imagine any father telling his daughter that. Abigail closed the remaining distance and pulled Victoria's strangely unresisting form into her arms. For less than a heartbeat, Victoria stiffened against the embrace. And then, as if she was no more than a marionette with its strings suddenly cut, she crumbled against Abigail.

"I don't want him to be alive and to come back, Abby." Her voice broke with a ragged cry. The unflappable, hard-as-nails-shell continued to crack. "What kind of a monster does that make me? I prayed for him to die during the war and now I pray every night he isn't alive and that he won't come back."

"You're not a monster." Abigail stroked her friend's head and back. "You've been hurt, by the man who promised to love and honor you. And you were hurt by your father, the one person in this life you should have been able to know beyond all doubt would protect you from that man."

Victoria wasn't the only wife in Brokken who had been on the receiving end of her husband's fists. More than once, she or Sam had treated Caroline Brooks for contusions that had been the result of a so-called fall. The worst had been when Caroline's wrist had broken when she stumbled in the spring house. When Abigail confronted her with what she suspected, Caroline admitted the accidents only happened after Peter had been heavily drinking, but her relief when news came that Peter had been killed in the

Wilderness so overwhelmed Caroline she had collapsed in the street. Abigail resolved she and Pastor Grisson were going to have a heart-to-heart about this. He was to be a protector, not only of his daughter, but of his flock.

Calvin's shout at the front door broke Abigail and Victoria apart. Her friend slumped, and Abigail grabbed her elbow.

"Miz Bailey, come quick. The Jennings boys are trying to kill Devon."

Abigail hesitated. Victoria straightened and waved a hand at her. "Go. I'm right behind you."

She rushed out the door. She didn't even have to ask Calvin where this latest scuffle was taking place. Without her asking, Calvin pointed across the street at the blacksmith shop. Abigail lifted her skirts and ran as fast as she could. When she got closer, the sickening sounds hurried her.

She rounded the corner of the building and skidded to a halt. She froze at the scene. Devon lay curled up on the ground, whimpering with pain. Alexander Jennings, the older of the boys, hefted a pair of heavy metal tongs, preparing to swing the tool again at Devon.

"Drop that now!" Abigail's immobility broke with her words. She didn't wait for Alexander to comply. She flung herself at Devon, covering him. Her heart sank when the boy's body grew limp.

"His ma got money from some carpetbagger back East, and he said they're gonna buy my ma out." Not the slightest hint of remorse colored Alexander's words.

"Devon didn't say that," Calvin protested. "His ma got money from his uncle, so they don't lose their place."

A cocking revolver sounded. "Put the tongs down," Victoria said. "Put them down, now."

The heavy tool fell into the dust near Abigail's head. She pushed herself off the unconscious child, bile rising in the back of her throat. She carefully moved Devon's arms from his head. To keep the bile from rising any further, she sucked in a deep breath and held it. Stay calm. *You can't help him if you turn into a hysterical mess.* Stay calm.

The jut of white bone through Devon's lower arm should have been her first concern but it wasn't. The massive swelling over his right eye had to be her primary focus. She eased her breath out and pressed her fingers lightly over the ridge of bone. A depression

marked where the tongs had made contact with his small skull. Her stomach sank feet below the dusty ground.

Drawn by the commotion, other citizens of the town started arriving at the scene. Abigail twisted her head over her shoulder. “Vic, keep them away.”

Victoria had a firm grip on Alexander’s upper arm. “What do I do with him?”

Abigail shook her head. Laura Peters’s scream pierced the near dark. Victoria released Alexander and stopped Laura, preventing her from throwing herself onto her son.

Pastor Grisson elbowed past his daughter and knelt next to Abigail. “What can I do to help?”

Abigail gently scooped Devon into her arms and stood. “Pray.”

Chapter Four

She understood why the wee hours of the night were the darkest. No matter what she did, Abigail knew Devon slipped further and further away. She kept a poultice made of arnica, comfrey, and plantain on his head wound to try to reduce the swelling. She hesitated to use either willow bark or laudanum. He couldn't swallow, and she didn't want to choke him. More importantly, he was unconscious and not in any pain. She had set his arm after tending to his head wound, even though she had little hope he would recover from the serious injury to his head long enough to allow the arm to heal.

Not once since she had taken over caring for the people of Brokken had she felt inadequate. *Until now.* Anger rose in her, searing with the intensity. How dare Sam break his promise to come back to her, safe and sound? *Damn that war.* Damn everything about it.

Devon's mother held his small hand clutched within hers, even in her exhausted sleep. She was sprawled next to him on the small bed.

Victoria had arrested both Alexander and Aaron Jennings. She had done it to protect them from several furious citizens who wanted to mete out a similar fate.

Hanging was too good for them, Abigail heard one of them say as she'd carried Devon to the doctor's office. Victoria hadn't charged them with any crimes. *Not yet*, her friend added, when she explained to Abigail why they were in jail.

Pastor Grisson sat vigil with Laura, but even he had slipped into a dozing sleep in the other chair in the small room. Abigail bent over Devon and took his small hand in hers. His fingers were as cold as ice. When she pressed her fingers against the pulse in his wrist, she barely felt it. A check of the pulse under his ear revealed it to be as weak as the one in his wrist.

A deep sigh broke from her when she straightened. If Devon remained among the living at dawn, she would be surprised. She made her way from the room, through the foyer, and out onto the front porch. She paused only long enough to grab her shawl off the

coat tree near the front door.

Tilting her head to the black sky overhead, the stars shimmered and swam in a high, thin layer of clouds. Maybe, it would rain. The damp night air seeped through her cotton blouse. Goosebumps rose, and she wrapped her arms around herself and pulled the shawl tighter. The stars blurred further, and she blinked. A broken sob rippled into the darkness.

A scream of frustration began to well in her chest, against the brokenness, against so much loss. Unable to contain that scream and unwilling to wake the whole town, Abigail shoved a clenched fist into her mouth and bit down on her knuckles.

She stumbled off the porch and onto the main street of town. She walked as fast as she could, her pace increasing with every step, until she ran pell-mell into the night, welcoming the comforting embrace of the blackness that shrouded the softly rolling hills outside of town. Falling to her knees with a stitch in her side, she threw her head back and screamed her fury at the capricious nature of the Fates, or God, or whatever directed her life. She screamed until her throat was raw and her lungs burned. She beat her fists on the ground, not caring that sharp rocks dug into the sides of her hands and bloodied them.

Finally spent, Abigail collapsed into the dust. The sharp edge of a pebble dug into her cheek, but she was too exhausted to move.

A slow turn of her head brought the sky into view. The high thin clouds earlier had thickened, almost fully obscuring the stars. “Why, God? Why did You have to take Sam? We need him here. I need him here.” Tears leaked from her eyes, dripping down the side of her head into the hair at her temples. “And, why Devon? He’s just a boy. He’s all his mother has left.”

A long, low, far-distant rumble of thunder was her only answer. She pushed off the ground and sat. Somehow, her headlong flight from town had brought her once again to this glade, a place she and Sam had called their glen. A long scan of the western skies brought into focus a darker black edging the night of the northwest. Low on the horizon, a faint flicker of lightning illuminated the depths of the faraway clouds. The breeze lifted and brushed over her heated cheeks, bringing the slight scent of rain from the northwest.

The rain crows had been right. The interplay of the lightning dancing in the clouds, painting them in purples and whites and blues, and listening to the roar of the thunder as it rose and crashed

soothed the pain in her soul. Watching a storm roll in, feeling its immense power, had been a favorite pastime for her and Sam. Sitting in the glider on the porch, wrapped in a shared blanket, and within the safety of his arms always brought a sense of security and peace to her.

Since the day word had come that Sam had succumbed to his wounds while held in that prison camp in Ohio, she had made her way to this small glade whenever she needed solace. It was where Sam swore he would return home to her, safe and sound ... where she was closest to him ... and where he was able to hear her.

"I miss you, Sam." Tears trickled down her face again. "I wish you hadn't made me promise if you died before me, I would find someone else. I don't want anyone else. I vowed to love you for the rest of my life."

Lightning flickered closer and thunder sounded a little sooner. The breeze grew, hissing and whistling through the winter dead grasses, and whispering in the boughs of the pine stand close to her.

"I hope you understand that I have to find a doctor for this town, and the only way to do that is to advertise and ask for men willing to come here to fill the roles so many of you left. And they'll be needing wives. Please know that you'll always be my first love. You will always hold a piece of my heart and my soul. But, I have to do what's right for Brokken and for others like Devon, who might need more doctoring than I can give. If you were here, or if any doctor was here, he might not be dying. I can't save him, Sam. That hurts the most. I can't save him, but you could have."

Deep purples, lavenders, blues, and blinding whites lit the interior of the rapidly approaching storm clouds. The subsequent roll of thunder had a sharper sound. The gusting breeze brushed damp fingers across her cheeks, tugging her hair away from her head. Unless she wanted to walk back to town in a rainstorm, she needed to get on her feet and start moving. Abigail pushed herself off the ground.

Still she hesitated and looked around the glade, bordered on two sides with stands of pines and illuminated with lightning. She gave herself a hard, mental shake. If he could help it, Sam had never shirked what he saw as his duty to be with a dying patient. It was the least she could do, if not for Devon, then for his mother.

"I never wanted to be a doctor, Sam. I was happy just helping

you. Now, I don't have a choice." She gave a nod. But maybe, if her plan worked, someone would take the burden from her. She sighed deeply and then ran from the rain.

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SHE RACED ONTO THE porch as the first heavy drops fell. Everything was just as she left it, less than an hour ago. Pastor Grisson was still asleep in a chair in the parlor. Devon's mother still held her child's hand in hers.

Abigail turned the wick in the low-lit lamp on the small table at Devon's side, raising the light. Miraculously, Devon was still alive. A quick check of his pulse in both his wrist and under his ear proved his heart beat stronger.

Abigail went into the front parlor for her tinctures and set about mixing up more of the poultice. So she could change the bandaging holding the mixture in place, she would have to wake Laura. Being able to assure the woman her son still lived would ease the task. When the mixture reached the proper consistency, she went into the other room and gently shook Laura's shoulder.

Laura sat bolt upright, blinking in confusion.

"Shhh. I need to change the poultice, and it's easier to do if I can lift him." Abigail gestured down at Devon.

The woman nodded. Without releasing her son's hand, she moved back far enough that Abigail could lift his small head and unwind the bandaging. The arnica, comfrey, and plantain poultice applied earlier had already reduced much of the swelling. As it was meant to do, the arnica also minimized the bruising. She applied a thick layer of the fresh poultice to the wound and rewrapped the bandaging.

"Is he going to be all right?" Laura's gaze never left her boy's pale face and she never stopped stroking the back of his hand, held within hers.

"I don't know." Abigail forced a long, deep breath while she wiped the last of the poultice from her hands. "I'm hoping he will."

"How is he?" Pastor Grisson asked. Abigail glanced over her shoulder at the tall, austere man standing in the doorway.

"Alive. Other than that, I can't say."

"We must leave it in God's hands, then. Laura, I'm sure every mother in this town is praying for your son."

Something shifted in Laura's expression, tightening the lines of

her face and darkening her already worry-darkened eyes. She lowered her son's hand to the bed and patted it once before she stood. "This is your fault."

Abigail's mouth dropped open at the vehemence of the words. Laura's eyes locked with Pastor Grisson's.

She rounded the bed, marching past Abigail to the preacher. "Your fault, Pastor Grisson. You preached that we need to have the patience of Job for our tribulations and not risk God's anger as Job did for questioning Divine Will. Instead, you should have been shepherding your flock with the teachings of the Savior."

Abigail snapped her mouth shut even as Grisson's dropped open. Undaunted, Laura continued. "The Savior preached peace and love for one another. 'Love thy neighbor as thyself.' Isn't that what He said? My son is lying there, most likely dying, because some of us can't or won't stop fighting a war that's been over for almost two years."

Grisson's gaze cut over to the little boy. "You're upset, Laura. If we could pray together—"

"Yes, I'm upset, but you don't have any right to tell me that what I'm saying is simply because I'm upset. I'm his mother and I have every reason to be angry with this absolutely and utterly senseless violence." Laura advanced another step on the preacher. "You never took a side in that war. I can respect that. But, what I can't respect is you still won't take a side. This town is tearing itself apart, and you won't say so much as a word to heal the wounds and foster peace. You're too afraid of someone getting upset with you!"

Abigail turned her back, not to avoid Grisson's embarrassment but to hide her own grim satisfaction with Laura's total dressing down of the pastor. She directed her full attention to the silent child, measured his pulse, assured herself he still wasn't feverish, and prayed for a miracle.

"I…I…I can't take a side." The preacher pulled back, as if offended.

"Oh, yes, you can. God's side." Laura's voice grew even sharper. Movement under Devon's eyelids drew Abigail's attention. With each word his mother spoke, the movement increased, as if the boy struggled to wake from a deep sleep. "If we don't start seeing each other as neighbors and the friends we were before instead of as former enemies, more children will be like my son. We must be citizens of this town, again. There aren't Yankees or Rebels

anymore. Stop hiding behind your façade and take Brokken's side."

A bright, harsh flash of lightning lit up the room while the simultaneous violent crack of thunder made all three jump and added a final emphasis to Laura's words. Ever so briefly, Devon's eyes fluttered. Abigail's heart leaped with the hope flooding her.

"Laura, come here." Abigail kept her voice as calm as possible, not wanting to alarm her. Even though she tried not to, Laura's haste to reach Devon revealed she hadn't fully succeeded.

"What's wrong?" Laura sank to her knees at the boy's side, brushing frantic hands over his chest.

Abigail shook her head and placed a hand on her arm to calm her. "I think he can hear you. Call him, just like you would call him in to supper."

Grisson crossed the room, hovering at the foot of the bed. He folded his hands and bent his head in an attitude of prayer. Laura took Devon's hand in hers again. "Devon, time to come in. Supper's on the table."

The boy's eyes fluttered but still didn't open. Without any urging from Abigail, his mother called him again. "Devon, now. Supper's getting cold."

"Mmmmma."

Laura gasped and burst into tears. Abigail squeezed her shoulder.

Grisson's usually rigid posture broke and he sagged with relief. The pastor whispered, "Thank you, Lord."

He wasn't out of the woods yet, and Abigail wasn't going to give false hope to anyone, especially his mother. "Keep talking to him, Laura."

"You scared me, Dev." Laura furiously wiped the tears from her face. "Scared a lot of us, including Miss Abby."

Devon opened his eyes, though one was still swollen with his head injury. "Wha's for supper?"

Laura's laugh mingled with tears, though this time they were happy tears. "Whatever you want. I'll make you anything you want for supper, even if it means I have to rob the Brokken Bank to get the money to buy the fixin's."

Abigail pulled her attention from Devon and his mother, looking for Pastor Grisson. He was gone. She straightened and patted Laura's shoulder. "I'll be out on the porch. I need a moment."

"Thank you." Laura's voice sounded as little more than a

whisper.

Abigail just nodded, not knowing what to say. It hadn't been her doing. If anything, this had been a miracle. She slipped out onto the porch, the pounding of raindrops on the tin roof a cacophonous roar. Grisson stood in a shadowed corner, his head bent. The muted grey light of the stormy dawn almost hid him from sight.

"Is that how you think, too, Abigail?"

"Think about what?"

He closed this distance. "Do you think I hide behind a façade and should have taken a side?"

"No one is asking you to fight that war, again." To give herself time to consider her words, Abigail settled her palms onto the rain-slicked railing. The wood was cool, clean, washed free of the accumulated dust under her hands. "Laura is right. We can't be Yankees or Rebels any more. We must be Texans, and more importantly, we must be the people Brokken needs. You have to set the example."

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AFTER A LONG WALK TO settle herself, Abigail opened the door of the small jail and let herself in. Victoria perched on the edge of the dark wood desk, with a steaming cup coffee clutched between her hands. Its aroma filled the small jail. Victoria nodded a greeting, and then returned her scrutiny to the two young men in the cell. The *de facto* sheriff said, "Father told me Devon's awake."

"And hungry." Abigail caught the smile Victoria couldn't hide as she sipped her coffee.

"If he's gonna be okay, can we leave?" Alexander asked.

"Nope." Just that one word from Victoria.

"Why not?" Alexander stood with his large hands gripping the bars, as if he could bend the metal with his bare hands. That he hadn't killed Devon was a miracle in itself.

"Because you tried to kill that little boy." Victoria set the cup on the desk. "You're twice as big as he is..."

More than twice, Abigail corrected silently.

"...and it was two against one. So, until I figure out an appropriate punishment for the both of you, you are staying here."

In all the years she had lived in Brokken, Abigail couldn't recall a time that she had ever heard Aaron, the younger of the Jennings brothers, speak.

“Punishment?” With Aaron’s slow question, Abigail’s mouth dropped open and snapped shut. He did speak.

“You ain’t got that legal power,” Alexander shot at Victoria.

“You’re right,” Victoria mused. Abigail poured herself a cup of coffee and settled into the chair behind the sheriff’s desk as Victoria continued. “I don’t have that authority. The only ones who do are those blue-coats with Reconstruction. So, I’ll just have to send a telegram to them over in Shreveport. Now, how do you think they’re going to take it when they get here and find out two former Rebels tried to kill a little boy just because his father fought for the Yankees?”

Abigail studied the black depths of her cup. Both Alexander and Aaron had run off to join Confederate forces near the end of the war, even though they were only thirteen and twelve at the time. The Confederates had been so depleted, no one questioned either of them when they said they were of age to join. That’s what that war had done—made babies into killers.

Alexander released the cell bars. “What kind of punishment did you have in mind?”

Victoria turned to her with a question. “How long is Devon going to laid up?”

“Well, I’m keeping him at my house for a couple of days, just to be on the safe side. Long term, with that broken arm and fractured bone over his eye, I don’t want him lifting anything more than a fork until the bones have healed, so it’s going to be at least six weeks before he can help his momma.” Abigail set her cup down. “I just stopped in to let you know I’m headed out to the Peters place to take care of the animals.”

“No, you’re not.” An utterly evil grin crossed Victoria’s features. “I just decided on the punishment for those two.”

Knowing her friend, this was going to be good. Abigail almost felt sorry for the Jennings boys. *Almost.*

Victoria walked over to the cell. “Until Miss Abby says Devon can do his chores and help his momma, you two will be doing everything for Miz Peters. You will keep her firewood supplied and chopped. You will feed their animals.”

“They got pigs.” Alexander sounded as if he was going to be sick.

“Well, then, I guess you need to learn real fast how to slop hogs. Taking care of them is no worse and no less smelly than taking care

of those goats at your house. Any chore that Devon did for his momma, you're going to do. You will be at the Peters home at sunup to do the morning chores and you'll be back there to do the evening chores. Every day."

"But..."

"Or, I'm going to send that telegram." Victoria didn't relent. "Your choice."

Alexander's shoulders slumped, and he looked at the floor. Victoria hesitated to unlock the cell. "If you decide to run away to avoid helping Miz Peters, you'd better keep running. Don't come back."

"We'll help her." Alexander capitulated to Victoria's terms for their release.

"One other thing," Abigail stood as she spoke. "You will help her, Alexander. You won't make Aaron do all the work. He never would have been involved in this if you hadn't taken the lead. He follows you like a puppy."

Alexander's gaze shot from Victoria to Abigail and back to Victoria. "Can she do that? Can she tell me to do that?"

"If she can't, I can. You heard her." Victoria twisted the key in the lock and pulled the cell door open. "You'd better get a move on. You've got chores to do at the Peters house and I know your momma has chores for you to do, too."

Once the boys were out of the jail, Abigail couldn't contain her laughter. "That was brilliant."

A rueful grin crossed her friend's face. She lifted her shoulders in a shrug and picked up her coffee cup. "Sometimes, I can do this job right."

"Most of the time you do it right, Vic." She let another laugh emerge. "And, I need your help now with your father."

"My father?" Victoria almost choked on her coffee. "Why do you need my help with him?"

"I have a plan, but if he doesn't approve of it and agree to help, it won't work." Abigail couldn't bring herself to drink any more of the strong, bitter brew. How Victoria could manage to choke this stuff down was beyond her understanding.

Suspicion narrowed Victoria's eyes. "A plan for what?"

"We need men here. We need a doctor—"

"You're doing just fine."

"No, I'm not. Devon is going to recover, but I think it's more due

to divine intervention than anything I did. Anyway, we need men here. We need men to be willing to marry the widows here and others to marry the young ladies who have no prospects for marriage unless they leave Brokken." Abigail twisted her cup on the desk. "We need to send off for mail-order grooms. Your father can be the one responsible for receiving the letters from the men who might be interested in coming to Brokken."

"Have you lost your mind?"

"Probably." Abigail continued to twist the cup round and round. "But as I see it, it's the only way we're going to save this town."

"I am *not* marrying anyone else." A very unladylike snort erupted from Victoria. "And you want my father to be responsible for deciding if those men who *might* respond to our request are fit to marry one of us? Have you forgotten what he told me when Jonathan was hitting me?"

"I haven't forgotten. I didn't say we make your father responsible for matchmaking. That's going to be entirely up to each of us. We decide if we want to remarry. We decide who to marry. But our advertisement will carry more weight if the men must respond to a preacher, don't you think?" Abigail stopped toying with the cup and looked over at her friend. "If you have a better idea to save this town, I'm all ears."

Victoria eased the cell door shut and then pulled the key from the lock. She tossed the heavy key ring onto her desk. The chattering of the large keys sounded abnormally loud in the small jail. "I'm not sure Brokken is worth saving."

"You don't believe that." Abigail gestured to the keys on the desk. "If you did, you wouldn't have come up with the punishment for the Jennings that you did. Now, help me plan how to present this idea to your father and get his approval."

"Appeal to his vanity. He is a very vain man. He'll do it if he thinks he will win the praises of his congregation. Why do you think he wouldn't take a side in that blasted war? It had nothing to do with pacifism." Victoria turned a pointed stare to her, her lips thinned. Her posture straightened as she eased out a tense breath. "But, you're right. My father should place the ad. We'll go talk to him."

Abigail gave a simple nod and handed Victoria her cup.

"Do you really think this town is worth saving?" Her gaze locked with Abigail's.

“Yes. It’s our home. I, for one, don’t intend to leave. And if I’m going to stay here, I’m going to do all I can to help it survive.” She took a step closer. “Please help.”

To her relief, Victoria nodded. “Let’s go see my father.”

“Now?”

“Why wait?” She was already opening the door.

Abigail hurried across the floor and caught her elbow. “Vic, wait. If we don’t have everything all lined out, he’s going to do one of two things—either take over totally or refuse to help.”

Victoria nodded and added a sigh as she closed the door. “There is no middle ground with him, that’s for sure. What do we need to do to ‘line everything out’?”

“We need to have as many of the women in this town onboard with this idea. We need a place for the men to stay while they court and hopefully wed the widows.” Abigail brushed a wayward strand escaping her braid off her face. “I think I can convince Sophia to allow a few to stay there. The ones who can’t pay board can work. Since she’s been on her own running the hotel, it’s needed some maintenance.”

Victoria leaned against the door. “There’s also the Broken Arrow. Those three brothers of Deborah’s aren’t much help out there. I think we can pull Deborah onto our side if we frame it that the men will be required to help on the ranch to pay for room and board until they marry.”

“Good. But, that’s only two.”

“It’s a start. You go talk to Sophia. I’ll send for Deborah and tell her I need to talk to her.”

Chapter Five

On a small rise, Deborah Brokken stopped to view the town, but it held little interest. Instead, the clearing itself held her attention. A tree's gnarled roots grabbed the ground, digging fingers into the damp soil, as if savoring the water before it evaporated away. Green moss and algae sprinkled its bark, like an old woman desperately trying to hide age spots with an overabundance of rice powder.

Winter held February loosely in its grasp, and the cool wind soothed her. When peace prevailed, she spread her handkerchief on a damp log, settled on it, and propped her elbows on her knees. Why had the sheriff sent a message by Calvin to meet her at the Brokken Bank?

At that moment, in the stillness, the tantalizing scent of an orange came to her. It intensified a craving.

Every Christmas her father had managed to bring home a sack filled with oranges, and he presented one to each of his four children. Her brothers peeled theirs quickly, devouring the slices two or three at a time. Not her. Without a word, she handed her orange to her father. He'd give her a wink, and then roll the orange back and forth on the table, to soften it, to release the sweet juices. And then he'd take his ivory-handled pocket knife and carve a hole in the fruit. She still remembered his smile when he handed it to her, a smile she'd not seen for six long years, since she was thirteen.

The last orange had been before the War, before her father left with her oldest brother Curt. Her other two brothers, Karl and Fritz, followed a year or so later. Of course, she'd stayed behind with her grandparents and Isaac Iverson, the foreman of the ranch.

It wasn't much of a ranch now. Her grandparents moved from Boston after her mother had died, to care for her. They need not have bothered. Isaac was the constant in her life. He'd been the only one who could rock her to sleep, who could help ease her colic as a baby. She'd been a difficult child, she'd been told more than once, until Isaac's patience worked wonders. She giggled. Or so everyone thought.

And even though she grew up motherless, life had been good before the War. She had her father, who doted on her, her three

older brothers, who teased her endlessly and protected her fiercely, her maternal grandparents, who tolerated her, and Isaac.

Her father had been busy with the bank he'd established, with the General Store he owned. He loved her, brought her oranges, but Isaac was more of a father, although his skin was dark. Her attachment to him never wavered. His wisdom guided her, and his laughter sustained her through the bad times.

Franklin Brokken had been killed in battle, and she'd suffered an even greater loss, her brothers. They'd returned, but with empty eyes that looked beyond her to some far-off battlefield.

She shook her head. *No.* Something remained, something as intangible as the craving for an orange. She longed to escape her memories but knew not how.

And she wasn't alone. The widows of Brokken, with no place to go, had their own haunted eyes, as depleted as the town founded by her father.

She shook her head at her musings and pushed herself off the log. Daydreaming her life away, that's what Grandmother would say. Deborah brushed off her dress, dismayed to see a stain from the mud. She'd wash out the stain as soon as she got home, before Grandmother saw it.

It was less than half a mile from here into town and now she wished she'd ridden her horse. She'd feared the recent rains left too treacherous a path and left Ruckus behind in her stable. Deborah squared her shoulders and tilted her chin a notch and walked toward the town. As much as she tried, she could not avoid all the mud puddle and slid once, narrowly avoiding a fall.

She reached North Main Street and headed toward the bank. Not many people were out today, the town square empty.

Three horses were tethered at the well, resting peacefully. They were the only horses she saw. Once, before the War, the square had been filled every day of the week, except Sundays when most folks attended services at Brokken's one church.

When new arrivals came into town to establish rival churches, Preacher Grisson met with them and convinced them to join his church. Most did although some moved on. Having one church united the town in theory but not always in practice. One man in charge led to stagnation.

She arrived at the bank, her family's bank where Curt and Karl worked, or at least passed their time. Fritz ran the General Store.

The Brokken population had little money to entrust to them or to spend in the store, so her brothers were idle most of the time, waiting, as the whole town seemed to be.

Curt was in the front, his elbows on the counter behind the teller's window. He acknowledged his sister's presence with a slight nod and bent his head to his hands as if hiding his face. Deborah walked to the fireplace, warmed her hands, and waited for Sheriff English.

Her father had secured the services of a master woodsmith to carve the oak surround. Although the wood was much lighter, it matched the intricate carvings on the cuckoo clock, high on the wall. It had been brought from Germany by her great grandfather, Wilhelm Brecheisen. His surname meant "breaker of iron" in German. Not long after Wilhelm arrived in America, he became involved in a fistfight with a fellow German, a man named Frederick Eisen. When Eisen landed a blow and Wilhelm fell, breaking his hip in the process, one of the onlookers said, "The iron has broken the iron breaker."

And just like that, Brokken became Wilhelm's last name. Her great grandfather cheerfully accepted the Americanization of his name but added the K, right in the middle. The K, he told his family, stood for *kein,* that meant "not" in German. He declared to all who would listen that he was *not* broken. And he set out to prove it, soon becoming one of the richest men in Pennsylvania.

She stretched again and yawned. Sheriff English's message had said two o'clock. It was now ten minutes past. Deborah walked to the large window at the front when the door opened, and Victoria English stepped inside. The sheriff's gaze swept the interior of the bank.

The sheriff never took a day, no, make that a minute, off from her duties. Her probing eyes focused on Curt. Her brother glanced up, his face startled. Deborah should have told him she was meeting the sheriff there.

His face quickly composed, and he gave a smile. "May I help you, Sheriff?"

Sheriff English waved a hand. "No business today, Mr. Brokken."

Deborah's cheeks burned. As hard up as the town was, she probably hadn't been paid in a month of Sundays. Even Curt's hands shook. As the children of the town's founder, they felt an

obligation to see the sheriff was paid for her duties, although officially, the levied taxes paid for her services.

Deborah caught her brother's attention. "The sheriff is here to see me, Curt. We're going into the meeting room."

"Conference room," her brother corrected. "Would you ladies like a cup of coffee?"

"Don't go to any trouble for me." The sheriff pulled off her leather gloves and rubbed her fingers.

"No trouble at all. I think Karl made some earlier before he went out."

Deborah should have spoken to Curt, asked about her other brothers. She'd not seen them for three weeks since they spent most of the time in town. She hid from them the hurt that they inflicted by their rare visits. Still, Curt, Karl, and Fritz were her bothers, and nothing could change her love for them. Even now, her heart ached. She wished Curt would give her a hug or even a smile.

Instead, he opened the conference room door. "We had a fire going earlier, and it's still warm in here. I'll bring the coffee." He gave a slight, oddly formal bow and left.

They both took a seat at the sturdy, yet elegant, oak table. The bank needed to convey a sense of prosperity and stability, her father had always said. Only the finest furniture would do.

Her brother returned immediately with the coffee service on a silver tray. "I'll be in the lobby if you need me ... unless you'd like for me to stay?"

Sheriff English gave a slight shake of her head.

His smile didn't waver, but a deep sigh carried into the room as the heavy oak door shut behind him.

Deborah sighed, too, and flattened her hands against the smooth surface of the table and smiled at the sheriff. "You needed to speak with me?"

Sheriff English seemed not to have heard. She glanced around the room with interest, her eyes alight. When the sheriff's penetrating gaze met hers, Deborah startled at its intensity.

Deborah licked her lips and linked her finger together. "Did you wish to discuss something?" Her gaze went to her hands, the highly polished surface of the table reflecting the sunlight into dappled patterns on her skin. And then she looked up and braced herself.

The sheriff's look softened, and she leaned across the table to touch Deborah's arm. "Sorry. I was thinking of other things."

Deborah relaxed. “From your look, I thought you were here to arrest me.”

Sheriff English laughed. “Actually, I wanted to ask a favor ... we need your help.”

“My help?”

“Yes, your family’s help. We’ve been making plans.”

Deborah folded her hands in her lap. “Plans?”

“Abby came up with the idea.” The sheriff cleared her throat before she continued. “Many of our men did not come back from the War. The ones who did are packing up and leaving.”

Deborah nodded. Hadn’t she been thinking the same thing only a few short minutes ago?

Sheriff English grimaced. “We have to face facts. Our town is dying.”

“What can my family do to help?”

The sheriff’s glance did not quite meet Deborah’s, and her cheeks pinkened. “We’d like to place an advertisement in papers around the country, to invite men to come here. We have plenty of jobs for them to fill.”

“The women are holding their own. I believe you are doing a fine job as sheriff.” Deborah poured the coffee and tilted her head. “Cream or sugar?”

The woman across from her shook her head and accepted the black coffee. She looked in her cup for a long moment before taking a sip and then set it back in the saucer. “Perhaps I’m doing an adequate job as sheriff, and the other ladies of Brokken are doing the best they can. Gwynn is squeamish but is a good undertaker. Molly could use help at the café, only because she is so busy. Sophia runs the hotel the best she can.”

“And the livery runs smoothly with all the Walsh ladies pitching in.”

The sheriff nodded. “However, some women want husbands.” She gave a harsh laugh and snorted.

Obviously, the sheriff was not one of them. Thoughtfully, Deborah added cream to her coffee and stirred it slowly. With such a shortage of men, she had never contemplated marriage. When she turned twenty-one, her grandparents would probably insist she travel to Boston to procure a husband. Of course, she had no intention of agreeing with their plans.

The sheriff cleared her throat. “We plan to have a meeting with

the ladies of Brokken. Before we do, we want to have everything accounted for. Abigail and I think the hotel and the Brokken Arrow ranch would be a good place to house the men. Do you think we could use the bunkhouse?"

To have time to gather her thoughts, Deborah refreshed their cups. She picked hers up, held it with both hands, her thumbs rubbing the smooth porcelain. A small crack had begun. Someone, probably Curt, had handled the cup carelessly. The crack would only grow, and the fragile cup would lose its usefulness. Tin cups held up better, but that would never do in the Brokken Bank.

"The bunkhouse would work, but the final decision would be made by my grandparents and Isaac ... Mr. Iverson, of course." She blew across the surface of the coffee and observed the ripples.

The sheriff smiled. "Of course. The reason I'm speaking to you first is to pave the way, so to speak. I'm not sure how your grandparents would feel about these men coming to your family's ranch."

"I suppose it depends on the type of man ..."

The sheriff waved a hand. "I will interview them as they arrive. Those who are not ... um ... morally upright, we'll send packing. They'll never make it to your ranch."

Deborah gave her a nod. "I'll explain that to my grandparents. How many men do you expect?"

"Thirty or forty. It's difficult to say until we receive the responses."

"We will need food and supplies."

"I'm sure the residents of Brokken will be willing to help. And there's an added benefit for Brokken Arrow Ranch. I will inform the men that they will have to work for their board and keep."

Deborah's eyes widened, and then she smiled. Her brothers had shown little interest in ranching since returning from the War. They'd probably not liked how her grandparents had taken over. Who could blame them? Her grandparents were not Brokkens, were Yankees from Boston, and had no clue how to run the ranch. But they still insisted on doing things their way.

Deborah looked into her coffee cup. Did her brothers view her the same way, as an interloper, even if they shared the same father?

She moved restlessly, and her gaze met the sheriff's. "I'm sure you know that the ranch has fallen into disrepair. That would certainly aid us."

“Will you inform your grandparents I will be by this evening?”

“Certainly. And will you stay for supper?”

“I appreciate the invitation, but I have to get back to town as soon as possible.” She pushed her chair back and stood, offering her hand across the table. “Thank you, Miss Deborah.”

Deborah took the sheriff’s hand in hers and then gave it a squeeze before she released it. “It sounds like a good plan. I’ll do what I can to help.”

The sheriff left, and Deborah banked the fire. As she placed the cups and saucers on the tray, the cuckoo sounded the hour.

Deborah straightened and listened. As the cuckoo echoed to silence, a prickling ran across her arms, as if someone had walked across her grave. Advertising for the men had to be an answer to their prayers, a way to revitalize a dying town. Why, then, did this feeling of impending doom surround her?

All she could do was be patient and see what Miss Abigail and Sheriff English’s plan wrought, but patience was not one of her virtues.

Chapter Six

When Deborah finished putting the coffee service away, she went into the conference room to make sure it was tidy. She hesitated. All three of her brothers were gathered around the table, and her heart gave a hitch. This was a good time to make amends, to speak to her brothers, to let them know how much she wanted ... to be their little sister again. She inhaled deeply and smiled.

Karl turned a red face to her. "What did the sheriff want?"

Deborah, taken aback, could only widen her eyes in surprise. Her other brothers watched her but did not offer a greeting.

Curt sent an angry glance to his brother.

After a moment of silence, Karl spoke again, his tone softer. "We were just wondering, that's all. Not every day that the sheriff comes for a visit."

Deborah moved away from her brothers to stand by the fireplace. Although the ashes were cold, as cold as her brothers, she held out her hands, as if to warm them. Without looking at them, she spoke. "Miss Abigail had an idea since so many men didn't return from the War. We have an overabundance of widows ..."

Karl laughed harshly. "And what?"

Deborah turned to face him. "She wants to advertise for men, and Sheriff English wanted to know if some of the men could bunk on the ranch."

Relief flooded her brothers' faces.

Karl's face, although still red, was now composed. "Of course, that's fine. We have plenty of room on the ranch."

Curt nodded. "Why didn't she ask me?"

An anger so strong, she herself was taken aback, boiled inside her. She turned back to the fireplace to compose herself. What did her brothers care about the ranch? Isaac was the one left to make all the decisions. Her brothers didn't care that she and her grandparents struggled to keep the ranch going.

And now Curt thought he should be the one to make decisions about housing the men? The place he'd not been for at least three weeks? Her breathing deepened. They didn't care—not about the ranch, not about her ... not even, it seemed, about the bank or

General Store. They only went through the motions.

She walked over to the wall of windows and pulled back the heavy curtain, still trying to contain the angry words threatening to spill. The street was empty. The town her father had founded was dying. It must be a difficult burden for his sons. Her breathing slowed, and she turned.

Fritz, her youngest brother, had not spoken, but his eyes had followed her, were still on her when she faced the room again. He gave her a tentative smile, as if he knew what she had been thinking. “Deborah, we’ve been neglecting, not just the ranch, but you. We will do better, I promise.”

Curt stepped toward her, took her elbow, and guided her toward the door. “Deborah, we were discussing business. I’m sure you have some errands to run.”

She allowed Curt to lead her from the room but pulled away once at the front door. Fritz followed them. “Wait, Deborah. I wanted to tell you...”

“What?” Deborah said, irritably.

He touched her arm and dropped his voice to a whisper. “Always remember I love you, Sis.”

To her surprise, Curt also spoke, although his jaw remained stiff. “Yes, we love you, Deb. See you later.” He gave her arm a playful punch, and all but pushed her through the door, bolted it after her, and pulled down the shade.

She was left outside the door, staring at the pulled down shade. The bank never closed at this time of day. She shrugged. Her brothers’ behavior since returning to Brokken had been unpredictable, but they were up to something. She headed toward the General Store to find it locked.

Perplexed, she debated what to do. Deborah hesitated a moment more and then started toward Brokken Arrow to find repose and forget her brothers. She’d tell her grandparents of the sheriff’s impending visit and prepare them the best she could. Even though the sheriff had turned down the invitation to eat supper with them, she’d help her grandmother prepare fried chicken, dumplings, perhaps a peach pie. The thought made her mouth water and she hurried home.

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THE SHERIFF CAME BY and was persuaded, probably by the smell

of the peach pie, to eat with them. Her grandparents had been agreeable to the idea of housing the men. The promise of free labor appealed to them. Her grandmother insisted on hearing all the details surrounding Devon's near-death experience. It was late when the sheriff left, and later still, by the time Deborah had tidied up the kitchen and gone to bed.

The next morning broke with the singing of birds, as if spring had arrived unseen. It was only one pair of tree swallows on the bare branches of the dogwood tree outside her window. They must have traveled alone, ahead of the flock. Or more likely, had been left behind, to survive the winter alone. At least they had each other. Deborah had no one. She shook off the pity. She had Isaac, and he'd be ashamed of her feeling sorry for herself.

She might not be able to see it, but she could feel it—the earth shook off winter. Spring was coming, and this pair of swallows had survived and were ready to sing again.

Deborah dressed quickly. The smell wafting up the stairs told her that Grandmother had arisen early to bake sugar cookies. Despite her grandmother's faults, she always fulfilled her duty to provide for those in need. She insisted Deborah take a basket of cookies to the Peters, immediately after breakfast.

Before she left, Deborah went outside and scattered bread crumbs for the birds. From the kitchen window, her grandmother scolded until she finally set off for the Peters.

As she walked along, she searched for other signs of spring on the way. Perhaps the blessing of rain might hurry along the Indian Paintbrush or other flowers. For now, all was barren and gray.

When she reached the Peters, Deborah did not rap on the door before it was flung open. She handed Mrs. Peters the basket. "Sugar cookies from Grandmother."

"They smell heavenly," Devon's mother said with a smile. "Please be sure to thank her for her kindness."

"Yes, ma'am. I will." Deborah tugged on the strings of her bonnet. When they didn't immediately loosen, she pushed it back to dangle at the back of her neck.

The cabin, though small, was clean and tidy. Mrs. Peters chatted away while she led her to the back room where Devon rested. His rosy cheeks made Deborah suspect that was not the case. He'd probably crawled in bed when he'd heard her enter. A colorful quilt was pulled up to his chin, hiding his broken arm.

Deborah stopped at the foot of the bed to give his mother room to move to his side. She laid a hand on his leg and gave a small squeeze. “What’s this, young man? Aren’t you all better by now?”

The young boy’s eyes sparkled. “Ma won’t let me up. I’m fine as frog hair split three ways, but she won’t listen. Heck, I’ll even do my chores without fussing. I can do them with my good arm.” He stuck it out from under the covers as if to demonstrate.

Deborah laughed at his determination. “I’m only joshing. It’s going to take time to heal that hard head of yours. You listen to Miss Abby. The doctor knows best.”

Mrs. Peters smoothed his quilt that didn’t need smoothing. “She’s coming by today. She’ll let us know how much longer Devon has to stay in bed.” She studied her son. “Even if she says you can get up, you can’t be gallivanting around, not until you heal.”

“Is there anything we can help you with?” Deborah asked.

“No, ma’am. Sheriff Vic has the Jennings boys doing all the work, so we don’t need to worry none.” She rubbed her arms as if she’d been hit by a chill. “Those boys haven’t had a proper raising, poor souls.” She shook her head. “And Aaron stays hid half the time, but I don’t doubt he’s shouldering most of the chores. Don’t know for sure since he’s so quiet and slips in and out without a word.”

A strand of hair fell across her forehead, and she smoothed it back into place. “I feel plain sorry for him.” She shook her head and then held forth the basket to her son. “Miss Deborah brought you a treat.” She stepped closer and lifted the red checkered cloth to give him a peek.

“Can I have one, Ma? Please.”

At his upturned pleading face, her heart gave a funny hitch, and she took a deep breath and blew it out softly to release the tightness. This young boy had been close to death, not expected to ever regain consciousness. His survival was a miracle, Sheriff Vic had told her.

Mrs. Peters’ eyes went to Deborah as if seeking her permission. “I don’t normally let him have sweets this early.”

Deborah chuckled softly. “Maybe this once won’t hurt.”

A smile crept across Devon’s face, and he pushed himself to a sitting position with his good arm.

Mrs. Peters gave a small nod to Deborah. “Let me fetch him a glass of milk. Would you like one, too?”

“No, thank you. I need to get back to the ranch, back to my chores. I’m not as lucky as Devon here. No Jennings brothers to help me out.” She laughed and gave his leg another squeeze. “Listen to your mother, Devon. And do what the doctor says.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Deborah pulled her bonnet onto her head and tucked in her hair. “And I’ll bring you some more treats if you are a good patient.”

After promising to visit again soon, she took her leave.

The Jennings brothers came in the gate as she approached it. They did not step back for her to walk through but pushed by, giving only a grunt of acknowledgment. She put up a hand to stop them.

“Alexander, Aaron, may I speak to you a moment?”

They stopped begrudgingly, both crossing their arms across their chests. Neither wore a hat. Their overalls were tattered. A couple of holes had been mended, but with large stiches, awkwardly. Had they attempted to mend their own clothes?

She cleared her throat. “How old are you boys?” she asked.

Alexander raised a brow and swiped a forearm across his forehead, as if wiping away sweat. “Seventeen.” He stuck a thumb in Aaron’s direction. “He’s fourteen, I reckon.”

“You reckon?” It was her turn to raise a brow.

Alexander squinted at her. “Age ain’t important to keep up with. What’s it matter to you?”

“Our bunkhouse is going to be needed soon to house some men. I thought you two could help our foreman get it ready after you finish your chores here. You two are men enough to do a full day’s work, if you’re not too busy at your own place.”

The boys exchanged a glance, and Alexander shook his head. Aaron moved back, half hidden behind Alexander.

He lived in the shadows. An urge, so strong her muscles twitched, shot through her. She longed to reach for him, to pull him forward, from the shadow of his brother.

Alexander studied her. “Your foreman is that darky.” He shook his head. “We have another job lined up.”

“Another job?” She frowned, puzzled. No one in town could afford to pay these boys for work. “Are you leaving?”

“Nope.”

“Who hired you?”

Alexander opened his mouth to speak, but it was Aaron who

spoke first. “Your brothers.”

Alexander turned around and pushed his brother. Caught off guard, Aaron stumbled back, landing on his backside.

Deborah rushed to his side and narrowed her eyes at Alexander. “Why did you do that?”

A muscle twitched in his jaw. “Don’t concern you.”

Aaron ducked his head, as if anticipating another blow, but spoke again. “Your brothers told us not to tell, but I didn’t think it would hurt none, you being their sister.”

Aaron struggled to his feet, and she put out a hand to help him, but he pushed it away.

She stood to her full height, placed her hands on her hips, breathing heavily. “Why would my brothers hire you?”

Alexander spit again. “Ask them.”

“I’ll do just that. Good day, boys.” She marched off.

The Peters farm lay to the east of town and the road into town went by the sheriff’s office. She debated stopping to speak to the sheriff about Alexander’s behavior. Somehow, she was uneasy speaking of her brothers to the sheriff. As she stood, lost in thought, she felt a tug on her sleeve and looked around.

“Calvin! Good morning. I didn’t see you there.”

His gaze did not meet hers. “Where you coming from?”

“From the Peters.” His worried eyes finally focused on her, and she took pity. “Devon is doing fine this morning.”

His eyes brightened. “Really?”

“Yes, really. I bet he’d like a visit from you.”

His gaze traveled to the ground. “Not after what I done.”

“Sheriff Vic told me you probably saved him.”

His face remained withdrawn. “But it wouldn’t have happened if it weren’t for me. I taunted him, just the same as Alexander and Aaron. Well, me and Alexander. Aaron never said much. And that was after Miss Abby told me and Devon to quit fighting. And I’d promised.”

“Sometimes it’s hard for us to keep promises, especially when others are around to help us break them.”

“I never should have listened to Alexander.”

“We all make mistakes.”

“Devon and I used to be best friends. This dumb War ruined everything.”

Deborah wrapped an arm around his shoulder and shared his

sorrow. The War had destroyed her relationship with her brothers, but it wasn't too late.

She smiled down at Calvin. "Friendships can be fixed. I bet Devon needs a friend right now. It's going to take weeks for his arm to heal."

"Weeks?"

"Yes, but he's young. His bones will mend quickly and be as strong as ever."

Calvin looked skeptical. "I'm scared he'll be mad at me."

"Hmm ... you'll never know unless you visit him. And you know what? I left some sugar cookies at his place. I'm betting he'll share with you."

Calvin's eyes remained doubtful. "Maybe, if he's going to give me a cookie, I need to take something to him."

"A gift is always a good idea."

His eyes brightened. "My pa made a checkerboard before he went off to the War. Reckon he'd like that?"

Deborah heart squeezed. "Are you sure it's something you'd want to give away? If your father made it?"

"I'll ask my ma. I bet she says yes, though."

Deborah thought so too. "It sounds like the perfect present. And you and Devon could play a game of checkers together."

"I'll run home and get it. My ma might go with me."

"I'm sure Mrs. Peters could do with some company." She doubted he heard her. He'd already sped away.

Her heart was lifted. She continued her way, toward the bank, wanting to make amends with her brothers. When she arrived, she tried to open the door, but it was locked.

She didn't have a key since one of her brothers was always there during the day. She curved her hands against the pane of glass and peered in, seeing nothing.

She banged on the door, calling her brothers' names. No one answered. A stab of fear ran through her. She moved away, her steps unsure, but a calm settled when she reached the outskirts of town, as if her feet knew this was the way to go.

Isaac and her grandparents knew she was visiting the Peters. Word would have been sent to her if anything had happened. She nodded, comforted by the thought. But where could her brothers be? Maybe they'd all gone to lunch together? Perhaps she should have gone to the Corner Café and checked before assuming the

worst.

She came to the rise and stopped, glancing back toward the town. She hesitated. Why had her brothers hired Alexander and Aaron? And then for the bank to be closed and the Brokken General Store. Maybe there had been trouble at the store—the railroad was being laid through town and the store had more customers than usual. Maybe one of the men working on the railroad had gone into town to make trouble. But then the sheriff would have been called to take care of it.

She'd been so lost in her thoughts she'd not heard the sound. A cougar, moving so silently, so swiftly, even if she'd been paying attention, it was doubtful she would have heard it.

She held her breath when it fully emerged from the undergrowth. It walked toward her. The cat stopped about twenty feet from her and sat. It watched her as she watched it.

The tawny body radiated strength. White dusted the end of its muzzle and the inside of its flicking ears, turned toward her. Instead of fear, Deborah only felt an awe at the beauty.

Her own reaction surprised her. Fear should have coursed through her veins. Instead, she was mesmerized by the depth of the green eyes. She should drop her gaze, in case the cougar thought she challenged it, but she could not tear it away.

Black smudges over its eyes reminded her of something, a glimpse at the edge of her memory that slipped away before fully realized.

When the cougar snarled with a flash of white fangs and bounded back into the trees, the spell was broken.

Light filtered through the tree branches, long stripped of their leaves, right on the spot where the cougar had sat. She breathed deeply as if she'd had a religious experience.

It took a few moments for her feet to begin moving again, toward the ranch, and a few more moments before she fully emerged from her trance-like state, convinced that the cougar was a sign. A sign of what, she had no clue.

She continued toward the ranch, her feet slipping in the mud, and then began to run.

Chapter Seven

"Isaac!" As Deborah entered the barn, dust motes flew, visible in a haze of orange light that found its way through every chink in the wall.

Isaac emerged from a stall, slapping at his clothes and stirring the motes into a greater frenzy. "Miss Deborah! What's wrong?"

"A cougar ..." She shook her head, to clear away the vision.

"A cougar?" His eyes widened.

She struggled to ease her ragged breathing. "I'll tell you about it in a moment. My brothers have locked ..." Her heart raced away. She licked her lips and counted each breath.

Isaac leaned against the stall and pulled out his pipe.

She frowned and spoke again. "The bank was closed. I don't know why."

He peered at her, his head bent to draw on the pipe, his eyes calm. He shook the flame of the match away. "I'm sure there's an explanation. Have you checked with your grandparents?"

"No ... but I will. But they've never ..." She paused to reconsider. She'd tell Isaac of the cougar, not speak of her brothers. "I stopped at the rise between here and town."

He nodded. "A nice view of the town from there."

"A cougar came out of the woods. It sat down, not twenty feet from me."

He frowned, creating a furrow of lines across his smooth face. "But it didn't attack you?"

She waved a hand. "No. It didn't attack, only watched. And I wasn't afraid as I watched it, too." She tilted her head and considered his face from the corner of her eye. He blew out a puff of smoke, and the smell drifted to her. "Do you think it meant something?"

At her question, he chuckled. "To you or the cougar?"

She smiled tentatively. "What did it mean?"

He shrugged. "In all my years, I've never heard of a cougar attacking a human. I don't think it was sizing you up for dinner."

"But was it spiritual?"

"I don't have special knowledge into such things." His voice still

held amusement.

“Surely you've heard something about cougars?”

Isaac put a hand to his chin and scratched briefly at the stubble. “I've heard that some tribes consider them an evil omen. Others just the opposite.” He shrugged.

“That doesn’t help.”

“Often, maybe always, evil and good exists within the same event. If you think it is a sign, maybe that was it.”

“What do you mean?”

“I will give you an example. When David was a young shepherd boy, he faced a lion. Would he consider that good or bad?”

“Bad, I suppose.”

“I’m sure he was afraid, and yet it prepared him to meet Goliath on the battleground. He learned to trust God. Bad times come upon us, threaten us, and yet they may be preparing us for something more.”

A stab of fear shot through her. She did not want anything bad to happen, no matter how strong it might make her. The War had been bad enough. She’d had enough of the conversation.

She gave Isaac an almost nonexistent nod, as if her agreeing with him might tempt fate. “I’ll go speak to Grandmother. She may have heard from my brothers.”

“If you’re worried, we could go back to town ...”

Deborah appreciated his offer, but she shook her head. “I’ll be fine. And I’m not worried so much as curious.”

“If you change your mind, let me know.” He turned back to his chores, and she continued up to the house.

Her grandparents had not heard from her brothers. And why would they? They were grown men, and unrelated to her grandparents, as her grandmother repeatedly told her when they’d been growing up. Why her grandparents did not treat her brothers as their own grandchildren seemed strange to Deborah.

She’d always felt sorry for her brothers. No one wanted to be rejected by members of their household, blood kin or not. Deborah sighed, remembering when Curt fell from the oak tree he was climbing. Papa had not been there that day. Grandfather had taken him to the doctor, at least he’d done that much. Sam Bailey had been the doctor at the time. Her grandfather had left her brother there, all alone.

She’d been confused, fearful, convinced her brother had died

when Grandfather returned alone. Isaac had left immediately and fetched him home. Curt's arm was in a sling, and he'd sulked for days. After that, he'd treated her grandparents with disdain, and who could blame him?

These were her grandparents. If her mother had not died giving birth to her, life would have been much different for the boys. Her guilt trailed her like dirty feathers on a beaten banty rooster.

She sighed. The past had to be put aside, and the present lived.

She went upstairs and changed out of her dress she'd worn to town and scrubbed at the stains.



AFTER SUPPER, HER GRANDPARENTS went to the front porch. Her grandfather enjoyed an after-dinner cigar, but Grandmother did not allow him to smoke inside. Deborah stayed in the kitchen, to tidy up. When she heard the pounding of hooves, she ran to the front door and opened it.

Young Calvin pulled his horse to a stop. Her grandparents were on their feet.

Her grandfather spoke, a frown on his face. "What is the matter, young man?"

Calvin took a deep breath, and his words tumbled out in a rush. "There's been a shooting, and your brothers, Miss Deborah, they done something."

She stepped forward. "What? What did they do?"

His wide eyes went to her grandparents. "I don't rightly know. But there's a big ruckus." He kicked the horse in its sides and was off.

"But who was shot?" Deborah called after him.

He either did not hear her or ignored her. Her gaze remained on him until he vanished from sight. Isaac came up with the wagon.

"Get in," he said without preamble.

Deborah turned to her grandparents who had both sat back down. "We've got to go. Now."

"You go see what that young man was talking about," her grandmother said. "Probably a bunch of nonsense."

Deborah started down the steps.

"Get your shawl. You're going to catch your death of cold."

Deborah darted inside and came out to hear her grandmother fussing at Isaac.

“You should have brought the buggy. That wagon is going to shake my granddaughter to death.”

Isaac did not answer but slapped the reins as soon as Deborah sat down on the seat beside him.

Darkness had fully gathered when they reached the edge of town. More people were on the wooden sidewalks and spilled out into the street. Molly, the restaurant owner, stood solemnly on the corner, not speaking as Isaac brought the wagon to a stop. Gwynn, the undertaker, and Lavendar, who sometimes helped at the hotel, came to Deborah when she jumped from the wagon unassisted.

The lanterns had been lit, displaying the small group of people who had gathered.

Lavendar placed a hand on Deborah’s arm. “My dear, what has happened?” Her voice was barely a whisper.

Deborah shook her head. “I don’t know. Calvin came out to the ranch. He said someone had been shot?” She held her breath until Gwynn spoke.

“Alexander. A chest wound, but not fatal. He’s been taken to Miss Abigail’s.”

Deborah began breathing again. Isaac had taken her elbow, steadying her. “But what of my brothers? Where are they?” She was afraid to ask if one of them had shot Alexander.

Gwynn shook her head. Other folks had pushed in closer.

Sophia, the owner of the hotel, was the next to speak. “Your brothers are gone. They were gone before Alexander was shot.”

Deborah was confused. “But who shot him? And why?”

Sophia looked past her. “The sheriff. She thought he had a gun. Turned out it was only a broom. She couldn’t tell in the shadows behind the store.”

Deborah felt more confused than ever. “Where’s the sheriff? I need to speak to her.”

Sophia shook her head, her eyes still evasive. “She’s gone after your brothers.”

“Can someone please tell me what is going on?”

Sophia shrugged. “No one is sure.”

Deborah glanced around. They’d stopped in front of the bank, and the shade was still drawn.

Deborah headed toward Miss Abigail’s, shaking off Isaac’s hand. No one followed her. She gave a cursory knock on the door and let herself in. Aaron, his eyes wide, was seated on a divan in the front

room.

Abigail was behind the teak bar, perusing her medicines. Deborah spoke without preamble. “What is going on? Why was Alexander shot?”

Abigail came around the corner of the bar and took her by the elbow to guide her into another room, closing the door behind them. “Please keep your voice down. Alexander is in considerable pain and is still awake.”

“Why did Sheriff English shoot him? And what do my brothers have to do with it?” Deborah’s hands shook, and she clasped them in front of her.

“Alexander and Aaron were in the back of the General Store, loading a wagon with supplies. Vic was out, making the rounds, and heard them. When she went around back, she thought Alexander had a rifle. It turned out to be a broom.”

Deborah frowned. “Were they stealing from the store?”

“No. Turns out they had a key. They were carrying out orders from your brothers. They were to load the wagon and drive it out to Yellow Rock by morning.”

“But why? That makes no sense.”

Abigail licked her lips before she spoke again. “There’s a small cave, not big enough for much, but the Jennings were told to unload the supplies there and then to erase all signs they’d been there. Your brothers paid them fifty dollars.”

Deborah continued frowning. Miss Abigail had not made sense yet.

“No one’s sure ... Vic stationed a couple of folks to guard the bank until she got back and could investigate, but she thinks your brothers may have ...” She paused and searched Deborah’s eyes.

“You mean she thinks my brothers may have taken money from the bank? That doesn’t make sense. They run the General Store and the bank ... Why would they rob their own bank?”

“It may be the Brokken Bank, but it held the town folk’s money.”

“And Alexander and Aaron knew this?”

“No, they didn’t bother to ask why your brothers needed supplies hauled to Yellow Rock.” She shrugged. “Maybe Alexander knew that they were going to be on the run. He hasn’t said much. He’s been in too much pain.” Her eyes filled with compassion. “Aaron saw only the money, didn’t question why. Poor boys have

had a rough life. You know their mother ..."

Deborah nodded. Their mother had an unquenchable thirst for moonshine and rarely knew what her boys were up to. "Where is their mother now?"

"I sent Calvin for her, but she's nowhere to be found. I gather that's the way it is most nights. You know there's a railroad crew not far from here." Her cheeks reddened.

A knock sounded at the front door, and Miss Abigail gave Deborah's arm a squeeze. "Let me get that. You can wait in here if you'd like."

"No, ma'am. It's probably Isaac looking for me."

It was Isaac. After speaking politely to Miss Abigail, he turned to her.

"Miss Deborah, we've been out long enough. We must be on our way." He'd said his peace and fell silent.

Deborah glanced toward Aaron who watched with frightened eyes. "Where will the boys go tonight?" she asked Miss Abigail.

"Home. No reason to keep them here. Alexander is in a lot of pain, but I've done all I can for him."

"We'll take them home with us. If their mother asks, please let her know they're with us. Do you have any special instructions for Alexander?"

"I do have something he can take for pain, every four hours or so."

"Isaac, will you help the boys in the wagon? I'll get the medicine."

"Excuse me, Miss Deborah," Isaac said. "I wonder if the boys wouldn't be more comfortable in the bunkhouse?"

Deborah turned to him. Surely her grandmother could not argue with that. "I'm sure that will be an acceptable arrangement."

They bid Miss Abigail goodnight and left.

Deborah did not attempt to speak to either boy. Alexander was in too much pain and Aaron too frightened. She'd have time to speak with them later.

Now, the anguish of all that had happened washed over her. Her brothers had stolen the town's money. Their actions had caused Alexander to be shot.

She tried to remember Isaac's words, how the lion David encountered made him stronger. But this was nothing like a puny lion. This was worse, much worse.

She turned her back to Isaac, buried her head in her hands and wept for the brothers she'd once known.

Chapter Eight

Deborah scrounged in the attic of the ranch house until she found each of the boys a decent pair of overalls that fit. She could have gone to the General Store, but she didn't know if the sheriff would want her in there. Besides, she wasn't sure if she ever wanted to show her face in town again. So, she'd washed the overalls and hung them in the sun to dry.

While they dried, she went to the bunkhouse, to check on Alexander. Calvin rode up. Was he bringing more bad news? Isaac came out of the bunkhouse to stand beside her. Calvin didn't offer to dismount.

She nervously wiped her hands on her apron. "Anything wrong?"

"No, ma'am, I don't reckon. But the sheriff wants to talk to you. She said for you to come to town, to the bank."

"Right now?"

"Yes, ma'am."

Calvin rode away.

"Isaac, will you hitch up the wagon? I need to go change, but I wanted to check on Alexander."

"His brother has done a fine job looking after him. Why don't you take a look?"

Deborah peered through the door. Aaron held a glass of water to his brother's lips. What was even more amazing was that Alexander thanked him when he finished.

"They're good boys who've been through a rough time," she said to Isaac.

He nodded. "Maybe. Time will tell. I'll get the buggy and meet you at the house."

"I'll be ready." Deborah hoped her grandmother was not watching as she hiked up her skirt and ran.

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ISAAC WAITED IN THE buggy. Sheriff English, holding a small sack, stood on the sidewalk outside the bank. She opened the door

and motioned Deborah inside. Deborah automatically headed to the conference room.

Today there was no fire in the fireplace. The cold seeped into her. She wished she'd brought a shawl, something to ward off the chill. She linked her fingers in her lap and waited for the sheriff to be seated.

Sheriff English gave her a half smile that was more a grimace. "These are difficult times."

"For you, too."

"I brought it on myself. Shooting an unarmed boy."

"You didn't know."

"No, we never know, do we?" She passed a hand over her eyes and pinched her nose.

Deborah wondered if she'd slept at all. She should offer to make coffee but was desperate to hear what the sheriff wanted with her.

"I need to ask you some questions about your brothers, but first I wanted to tell you something ..." One eyebrow hitched up a notch. "How are the Jennings boys doing, by the way?"

"Alexander is still in a lot of pain, but Aaron is tending to him."

"Good. Abby told me that Alexander should make a full recovery. What I wanted to tell you is that their mother is not coming back."

"What do you mean?"

"It looks like she took off with a man from the railroad, left for parts unknown."

Deborah nodded but didn't speak.

"How long can they stay at the ranch?"

"As long as they need to. I'm not sure if they'll even miss their mother. Aaron will continue the chores at the Peters."

"Yes, and Alexander, as soon as he recuperates. Abby thinks he should be able to do some light chores in a week or two."

Deborah nodded.

The sheriff studied her. "So, you have no idea where your brothers have gone?"

"No, and I've been thinking about it, trying to figure out where they would have gone and why." Unexpectedly, tears burned her eyes. She blinked them away.

"Their mother's side of the family? Or to someone in the Brokken family?"

Deborah shook her head. "As far as I know, their mother had no

other family. There are Brokkens in the Pennsylvania region. I can't imagine why they'd go there, to a place they'd never been, to see people they've never met, even if they are related to them."

"I'll send a telegram, just to be sure. If you could get me a list of names ..." Sheriff English pushed her chair back.

Her heart fluttered in her chest as she stood to face the sheriff. "Did they take all the money?"

The sheriff shook her head. "Not all. They left a note, with a small bag of coins."

Deborah shouldn't have asked, but she needed to know. "Was the note for me? Or did it mention me?"

The grimace was back on the sheriff's face. She awkwardly patted Deborah's shoulder. "No, not really. It was a note to the town. I have it, if you want to read it." She got it from a pocket in her leather vest and handed it to Deborah.

The note said: *It is with the utmost regret we are borrowing the money in the bank. This is a temporary situation and will be resolved soon. We are leaving enough silver to tide you over until our return, unless unforeseen complications arise. All will be explained soon. Our prayers and good wishes go with the town. Sincerely, The Brokken Brothers.*

Confused, Deborah glanced up to meet the sheriff's gaze. "They're borrowing the money? For what?"

The sheriff shrugged. "No one I've questioned knows anything, not even Lydia Walsh who was sweet on your brother."

"On Karl?"

"No, Fritz." The sheriff laughed. "You didn't know about that? The whole town knew."

Her brothers had been hiding a lot from her. Her heart constricted. They'd never cared enough to share their lives with her.

"There was one more thing, though. They left something with your name on it." The sheriff reached into the sack and pulled out a jar and slid it across the table to her.

The contents glistened in the light—orange marmalade. Deborah grasped it and gaped at the sheriff. She held the jar as if it was a precious baby and blinked away tears.

The sheriff remained silent a moment and watched her. And then she stirred. "I wanted to tell you that all the ladies in the town are meeting at Abby's on Sunday afternoon. She'll be informing them of our plans to advertise for men."

Deborah didn't wait to be asked. She shook her head. "No, I couldn't possibly go. What must the town think of me?"

"We cannot control the actions of our family, only our own. I'm sure no one blames you, Deborah."

They walked outside into the sun, and Deborah shaded her eyes. "The men who answer the advertisement are still welcome to come to the ranch ... I mean the ones you have checked on."

"Come to the meeting. You're part of this, Deborah."

Deborah shook her head. "I don't think I have the courage ..."

"We often have more courage than we know. I'll be watching for you."

Deborah didn't answer, and the sheriff walked away, in her usual way, focused on an unseen destination, and not letting anything stand in her way.

Deborah tilted her chin. This town had been named for her father, and she was the only Brokken left, at least for now. Maybe she did have enough of the Brokken in her, the iron that was still not bent, not broken yet. She nodded to herself, climbed in the buggy, the jar still clutched tightly in her hand, and Isaac turned the horses toward home.

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DEBORAH SLIPPED INTO the back and found a seat in the corner without attracting anyone's attention, except Sheriff English. She'd been watching for her, as she'd said.

"If our missing men were going to return to us, they would be here by now." Miss Abigail choked on the words and blinked. A stray tear slid down her cheek. When she spoke again, her voice was stronger, more forceful. "Many of our men will never come back to our arms."

"Some of us are not ready to let go just yet. I know Matthias will be returning," Gwynn said, her voice barely a whisper. "Or at least I pray that is so. I don't relish the thought of being alone anymore than any of you do, but it's my duty is to wait for his return or word of his ... passing."

Several friends averted their gazes. Others grew teary-eyed. The litany of the names of the men who had fallen on some distant battlefield echoed within her, probably every woman in the room could recite the roster of the dead.

"What do you suggest we do?" Lydia Walsh asked, her eyes

bright.

Abigail set her needlepoint down. “This town does not boast of a man between the ages of fifteen and sixty, not since the Brokken brothers, erm, left town.”

Several of the women stirred but no one spoke. Gwynn stood and moved to the window. “Let’s change the name of our town. I don’t care if it was their Pa who founded —”

Abigail held up a hand. “Let’s think long and hard before we decide we want to change our town’s name.”

Several heads bobbed in agreement. Brokken was their home, a familiar name. These ladies didn’t like change, but that didn’t mean they were in any mood to forgive her brothers.

“We can’t jump to conclusions. Those young men may be coming back soon.” This came from Lavendar Lilly, a tiny woman, sitting by the fireplace, who was known for taking in every mangy dog that came through town. She was busy darning a sock. A man’s sock.

“Whose sock is that?” Abigail asked.

It was Sophia who answered for her friend. “Lavendar and I have been talking. It’s a shame we’ve ignored Alexander and Aaron for so long. We’ve decided to help out, as we can. Good warm socks seemed a good place to start.”

Abigail’s gaze swept over them and then to the other ladies. “That’s a wonderful idea. We should all be doing more to help.”

Most of the ladies murmured in agreement.

When they’d quieted, Abagail spoke again. “With most of our men and money gone, we face desperate times. We are on a main line of that railroad track. Those people who build the tent cities along the rail line are downright dangerous. Those tent cities are nothing but dens of iniquity filled with coarse men, and, with the railroad being rebuilt, reconstruction can’t be far behind. Sarah shared the letters from her sister reporting what that was like in New Orleans.”

“What are you suggesting?” Sophia asked.

“Desperate times call for desperate measures.” Abigail drew in a long, deep breath. “In the Dakota Territories, there is one woman for every ten men. They’re bringing in mail-order brides.”

“You want us to become mail-order brides?” Annie’s eyes widened, and her glance flew to the sheriff.

It was Gwynn who answered. “I refuse to leave my home.” Her

eyes narrowed, and she crossed her arms and patted one foot.

The other voices, as if drawing strength from hers, became a chorus.

"I don't want to uproot my children."

"That could be dangerous."

"My Andrew is buried right outside of town."

"I ain't leaving either."

Abby shook her head, silencing the cacophony. "Ladies, I am not suggesting we become mail-order brides. I am suggesting we advertise in newspapers back East and in the South, or even farther West, for mail-order grooms."

Shocked gasps filled the small parlor followed by a contemplative silence. Deborah's eyes widened, although she'd been expecting the announcement. Hearing it spoken of by Abigail sounded a bit shocking, but it did not concern her. Her grandparents would never allow their granddaughter to correspond with anyone except, perhaps, a gentleman from Boston.

Sarah stirred first. "You mean marry a Yankee?"

"Be careful," Abigail warned. "Many of us still have family up North." She met her friend's gaze. "Your ranch is the farthest from town. I would think if the choice was between your ranch being raided or marrying a Yankee, a Yankee would be the lesser of two evils."

A tense silence ensued.

Melody, from the back of the room, broke the stillness. "He could be a Southern gentleman too."

Another long silence fell, and then Ora Walsh asked, "This might be the only way to save Brokken and bring menfolk here." Ora had three daughters, all of marrying age, and none with husbands to show for it. She had as much to gain, and lose, by this endeavor as anyone. Ora's own husband, Daniel, and oldest son, Daniel Junior, had been killed in the war. They needed help running the family's livery at the end of town.

The youngest Walsh sister, Hannah, sat in the corner of the room holding a book, not paying attention to the argument around her.

"I for one, love the idea," Lydia, Ora's middle daughter, proclaimed. The buxom blonde had been blessed with ample curves and pretty looks, both of which were wasting away with no men present. It wasn't surprising she was for the idea of the

advertisement. It hadn't taken her long to recover from being jilted by Fritz. Or had she jilted him?

Rebecca, Ora's oldest daughter, turned red with embarrassment. "Mother, we can manage without having to have strangers brought in to help us."

With a stern expression, Ora glared at her oldest daughter. "Enough. This needs to happen, for all our sakes."

Miss Abigail smiled. "We will allow Preacher Grisson to place the advertisements in the papers. Victoria will make sure no scoundrels answer the ad. We ourselves determine if any of the responses merit an answer from us."

Several of the women bobbed their heads, and some smiled. Others had widened eyes, and color drained from their cheeks.

Abigail spoke again, her voice dropping, as if to comfort them. "The men who answer can stay at the hotel or ..."

"The Jacksons can certainly take them in at the ranch —they need to after their grandsons nearly destroyed our town." Sarah placed her hands on her hips and looked defiantly in Deborah's direction.

"Step-grandsons," one of the women said.

Deborah's cheeks burned. They spoke of her family as if she was not present.

Abigail held up a hand. "Have you forgotten Deborah took in the Jennings brothers? And besides, she has already agreed to take in the men."

"Yes, but her grandmother did not want to."

Abigail sighed. "We will not engage in gossip. Now, let's get down to business. Exactly what qualities do we want in these men?"

Sheriff English clicked her tongue and sighed. She sat down at the small desk and dipped the pen into a bottle of ink and had it poised above the paper. "I reckon I'll do it for y'all since it's my ma and pa who will run the advertisement."

Abigail shot the sheriff a look and spoke again, her voice louder. "It's time we came together, ladies. The War is over, has been over for two long years. We are no longer Rebels, no longer Unionists. First and foremost, we are citizens of this town. If we want to save Brokken, our hometown, we will come together."

Deborah sucked in her breath, a little too loudly. She smiled at Abigail, pleased to finally hear someone willing to fight to save her father's town. The infusion of men could only bring good.

Heads turned toward her, and she got to her feet and found her way outside. She stood stockstill beneath Abigail's window and removed her shoes. After a moment, she moved away on bare feet. She made less noise without shoes, and the freedom it gave made her feel at one with the world.

She hugged the happiness to her as she'd hugged the orange marmalade. In the morning she'd make a big pan of biscuits and share her orange marmalade with the Jennings. Pleased, energy surged through her.

When she reached the outskirts of town, she moved onto the road and paused to gaze at the sight that never failed to fill her with awe — the night sky, crowded with stars. As if carried on the breeze, words floated before her, soundlessly: *The skies display his handiwork.*

Deborah scrunched her forehead. Was that part of a song? Or was it a verse from the Bible? She couldn't remember. With a shake of the head, as if that would clear away the words, she moved forward.

She wiggled her toes in the dirt. Life wasn't all bad. The moon shone down, a reflection of the glory of the sun. She reached back to deftly unbraid her hair.

Sudden exhilaration filled her. She ran the rest of the way home, her hair streaming. The cougar, she was sure, raced beside her.



Brokken Arrow: Chance and Deborah

March 1867
Easton, Missouri
Chapter Nine

Chance Hale penned up the cow, scooped the bawling calf in his arms, and headed for the fenced area behind the barn. The momma's cries joined with her calf's, and their mournful din echoed those from the war.

He longed to press his hands against his ears, to drown out the sound, or release the calf and let it take its chances. Instead, he gritted his teeth and kept moving forward. His arms shook by the time he reached his destination, not solely from exertion.

With no time to waste, he worked feverishly to design a makeshift bandage from some old rags hanging at the front of the small barn. If he had checked to see Danny had done the job, he wouldn't be taking care of a lamed-up calf. It had stepped in a gopher hole, one he had told his nephew, Danny, to fill. It was his fault. Something, Chance wasn't sure what, had sunk its teeth into the lame calf, leaving a deep gash. He cursed his nephew.

Since he'd returned to Missouri, he'd worked feverishly to get the farm back up and running. This was the first calf of the year, coming early, before all the snow melted away. Each calf was precious, a way for his family to re-establish themselves. Little was left after the raiders, mostly deserters from the Confederacy, had taken what they wanted. Nine brothers had gone to War. Only two had returned, himself and his oldest brother, Daniel, his elder by fourteen years. Daniel, his wife, and their five children lived in the big house, out of sight of his small cabin.

And that's the way he liked it—alone with peace and quiet. Too bad Daniel forced Danny to work with him, if work was the right word.

Danny, his brother's namesake, had been born several years before the War. It'd been a shock to see the husky fifteen-year-old when Chance had returned home. When his nephew turned sixteen,

he was already courting Miss Susie Elmore. They'd married last month, and Susie had moved into the family home with Daniel and his brood.

Chance finished his ministrations and carried the calf back to his mother whose smooth tongue reached for her calf before he'd entered the pen. The momma smelled of earth and hay, and this steadied him, eased the shaking of his limbs.

After Danny's irresponsibility, he could not trust him to keep a close eye on the calf, to watch for infection. It would be one more thing to add to his list of chores.

Chance snorted in anger. Newly married, Danny had little time to help. Heck, since Chance had returned, he'd observed his nephew doing precious little besides courting and wooing Susie.

Chance frowned. To be fair, it wasn't only the soldiers who'd had to endure hardships but also their families left behind, with so little to keep body and soul together. Who could blame Danny for wanting a wife and family? He shook his head. Courting and wooing were all well and fine, but that didn't keep you fed.

Chance was short on patience with his nephew. The farm hovered on ruin. His brother Daniel with a leg amputated right above the knee, was content to sit on the porch and rock his life away. A missing limb need not have kept him confined at home, but Chance suspected basking in his wife and daughters' care for him, wallowing in it, kept him from realizing the full extent of the farm's precarious position.

The burden of rebuilding the farm, of getting the family back on their feet, fell to Chance, and he accepted the responsibility, needed it, as a matter of fact.

He walked to the pump to wash the blood from his hands. Blood stained his clothes, and even the fresh scent of water could not displace the odor swirling around him, clinging to him. The morning mist lifted and revealed the vista. The trees were bare although small green buds were discernible. The trees gave him a sense of safety and secluded him from the stares of his neighbors.

A creek ran not forty feet from where he stood, and the gurgling sounds almost made him forget the din of war. Over almost two years now, the War's effects still rippled forth and tainted everything.

Before he had made it home from the War, his parents had been killed by raiders. Being the youngest, he had been left out of his

parent's will. He wanted to believe it was because his assignment had been particularly dangerous, and they hadn't expected him to come back from the War. But more likely, they had disinherited him. He didn't know; they'd never spoken of it.

Heat rose from his neck into his face, and he gritted his teeth. He'd make amends. With work and perseverance, he'd get the farm up and running.

The ministrations to the calf had thrown him behind, and he worked quickly to finish his chores. He took a moment to judge the position of the sun and reckoned he had enough time to grab another cup of coffee.

His home was small, only two rooms, although it suited him fine. He took his coffee to the table, planning to sit for only a moment.

Outside, his dog Rascal barked, quieted, and then a knock sounded at the door. It swung open, and he was surprised to see Daniel and Danny. Daniel had never entered the cabin since they'd returned from the War, but today, something had gotten him up and moving. Chance's gut told him it did not bode well.

"Morning," his brother said, his gaze darting around the cabin.

Chance grunted in reply but didn't move from his chair. His brother's gaze landed on him.

Chance cleared his throat and motioned to the pot on the stove. "Would y'all like some coffee?"

Both shook their head. The tips of Danny's ears were red and his eyes downcast. After a moment, Daniel paced around the room with his cane beating a rhythm. His movements reinforced Chance's belief that his brother could have, should have, been doing more around the farm.

When Daniel had circled the room a couple of times, he nodded, as if satisfied, and turned to face his brother. "I'm just going to come out with it. Danny and Susie need your cabin."

The words slammed into him like a gut punch. Emotions swirled, pushing his anger to the surface. He gripped the edge of the table until his knuckles whitened.

His brother took a seat and leaned his cane against its edge. "I reckon I could do with that coffee now."

Chance glared into his brother's face before pushing back his chair with unnecessary force. He poured the coffee and slid the cup to him, sloshing some out in the process.

Danny remained rooted to the same spot, his ears becoming a brighter shade of red when Chance directed his gaze in his direction.

Chance refreshed his own cup and blew across the top of the coffee. He watched the ripples as he forced the muscles in his face back to impassivity. Perhaps he was overreacting.

His brother leaned toward him. “Truth be told, little Susie is already expecting. We need to get them two settled before that young’un gets here.”

A pain, as sharp as any knife, pierced his heart. He didn’t take time to examine why but simply nodded. He decided to test the waters. “It won’t take long to build me a house. I don’t need much more than a lean-to.”

Daniel shook his head, and Chance’s gaze slid away, to a spot on the wall. He held himself in, waiting for the next blow.

Daniel coughed. “Nope. Won’t do. Won’t do at all for you to stay on this land. We got less than five hundred acres here, and I got more young’uns who be needing land.”

Chance’s breath released in a swoosh. He flattened his hands against the surface of the rough wood, as if he planned to propel himself across its surface. His voice remained level. “What are you saying?”

“You need to get out on your own. You ain’t more than twenty and six ...”

“Not yet twenty-four.” He held himself still and kept his breathing steady.

“Danny boy over there is fixin’ to have him a young’un. Done beat you to it, but heck, there’s plenty of women who might have you.”

Danny made a sound, halfway between a snicker and a cough. Chance let his gaze light on him for the briefest of moments and straightened. His eyes narrowed.

He took another sip of coffee that had somehow grown cold. He drank it anyway and set his cup down. “How am I supposed to make a living? Farming is all I know.”

His brother ran the back of one thumb across his lip and smiled. “You made a name for yourself in the War. Someone’s sure to help you out—heck, you could still use *your skills*.” His grin held something. As far as Chance could figure it was maliciousness.

A realization washed over him. His brother was jealous because

he'd come through the War unscathed and had renown, unwanted as it was. His brother's treatment of him was not solely a result of what Chance had done to his family.

He pushed back his chair with such force it toppled backwards. "I have chores to do." Stiffly, without giving his brother a glance, he headed out.

His nephew stepped in his path. "We want you gone as soon as you can get out. Understand?" Danny had found his voice now that his father had done his dirty work.

Chance didn't answer but pushed past. He jumped from the porch instead of using the steps. Rascal met him, and he patted the dog's sides and allowed some of his anger drain away.

He headed to the barn to check the calf. A shock ran through him when it came into sight. It was stretched on its side with its tongue lolling out. His bandaging had done little good. The poor calf had bled out. The cow raised her head and let out a mournful moo.

Chance rested his forehead against a rough plank of the barn and closed his eyes for a second. He straightened his shoulders. He still had work to do.

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DEBORAH BROKKEN AND Sheriff Victoria changed trains in Missouri. This train was smaller and reeked of sweaty bodies. Its black, belching seemed filled with hot anger and produced smells that made Deborah's head ache. With each exhale of dark smoke, the trains pulsing matched the pounding in her head. She peered through the window, and for the briefest of seconds, she allowed her forehead to touch the cool pane, to ease the throbbing.

It was no surprise her head ached. For the past few weeks, she'd endured continual stress. Each day, she feared the sheriff would find her brothers. Equally, she feared they would not. Either outcome held heartache.

The yearning for her family had forced her to come with the sheriff, even if it led to her brothers' imprisonment. She'd had high hopes of finding them among their German Pennsylvanian kin, and a scheme to escape with them had nebulously formed, but no one, it seemed, knew her brothers' names, much less their faces.

The trip had not been a complete waste. Her kinfolk had surprised her. So many still clung to the German way of life, and it

comforted her to learn of it. Her father had been different than these relatives, probably because he'd been a cattleman in Texas, but even he had not completely abandoned his heritage.

Their ranch house, built of dark wood, had ornate carved railings and trim around the roofline. Neighbors had told him to paint his house white, to reflect away the hot rays from the Texas sun, but he'd refused. And somehow, the house was as cool inside as any Deborah had ever visited. The windows, situated according to his specifications, caught the slightest breeze.

She gave herself a shake to rid herself of her yearning. Her homesickness was not for the people ... not even for her grandparents, whom she often wished would go back to Boston. Her mother's parents were Jacksons, not Brokkens, and they did not possess the Brokkens' love for the ranch, the very place Deborah longed for. She was particularly homesick for the cabin, the Shooting House, her brothers had named it. She often rode her horse along the tree-lined stream that fed the lake. The path along the stream led to the cabin that held so many happy memories.

They were on the last leg of their trip, and she could endure, even if she had no place to rest her weary head. She longed to lean against Sheriff Vic and sleep. That wouldn't do. Victoria was not the motherly sort and would be aghast at the suggestion. The sheriff was good to her, in her own way, and Deborah regretted that the journey had been a waste of time, money, and energy for her.

A man's voice broke into her thoughts. "Ladies, if I'm not mistaken, this is my seat?"

His statement was a question, and Deborah and Victoria both gave him a nod of acquiescence. He had a ticket in his hand and held it out to them, as if to prove his claim. He stowed his case away, removed his hat, and took a seat across from them.

"How do you do? I'm Klint Caper." He nodded at the sheriff and tilted his head toward Deborah.

She looked into the bluest eyes she'd ever seen. She opened her mouth to speak but not a word emerged. She averted her gaze to regain her composure.

Chapter Ten

To Deborah's relief, Sheriff Vic was more composed. "We are well and you?"

The man smiled, and those sky-blue eyes twinkled. "I am very well, thank you.". His gaze, filled with curiosity, traveled from Deborah to Victoria. He raised his eyebrows at the sheriff "I take it you're a lawman? I beg your pardon—law woman?"

Sheriff Vic looked down at the star pinned to her vest. For a moment, Deborah thought she was going to buff it with the back of her shirtsleeve. Instead, she smiled. "Yes, sir, I am the sheriff of Brokken, Texas."

Victoria's eyes had brightened. She was as taken with this strange man as Deborah was.

The man's dimples deepened. "Brokken, Texas? What a coincidence. I'm traveling to Brokken myself." His smile revealed straight white teeth, and he canted his head in Deborah's direction. "And is this your posse?" His grin was teasing, infectious.

Deborah found herself smiling in response and repressed a silly giggle. "No, sir. I'm only a rancher's daughter."

Sheriff Vic cast her a sideways glance with a warning in it and cleared her throat before Deborah could say more. "We were visiting some of Miss Brokken's relatives."

The man drew his brows down in thoughtful contemplation, probably wondering why Victoria was wearing the star pinned to her vest if they were only visiting. In a second, his face cleared, and he gave a nod, as if satisfied.

Victoria glanced again at Deborah, as if to judge her reaction, and then back to Mr. Caper. Her shoulders visibly relaxed. "I'm Mrs. English, and this is Miss Deborah Brokken."

"Brokken? The same name as the town?" His gaze sought Deborah's again.

The heat in her cheeks intensified, and she longed for a fan to clear away the blush she knew was there. She cleared her throat and spoke, her voice soft. "Yes, sir. My father established the town. Did you say you are traveling there?"

"Yes, I am." He reached into a pocket and pulled out a

newspaper clipping. After he smoothed it out, he showed it to them, as if it was something he was particularly proud of. “I corresponded with a young lady by the name of Lavendar Lilley.”

This time, Deborah could not suppress her giggle. Victoria gave her a stern look, and Deborah lowered her eyes and bit her lower lip. What was wrong with her? She’d never behaved this way before.

The train slowly gained speed, and Deborah turned her attention to the folks on the platform waving goodbye. It was some minutes before she’d regained her composure, long after they were in open country. To quit behaving like a silly school girl, it was best to keep her gaze away from those sky-blue eyes. She half listened as Victoria greatly exaggerated Lavendar’s virtuous qualities.

A pang of jealousy over lucky Lavendar Lilley shot through her. Deborah had not wanted any part of the mail-order scheme, but that was before she had caught sight of Mr. Caper’s blue eyes, dark hair, and tall stature. The heat climbed to her cheeks again. Her grandparents would be appalled if they knew what she was thinking.

When there was a lull in the conversation, she gave Mr. Caper a quick glance, shifted her gaze to her hands, and spoke. “Lavendar is such a dear. You’ve never met anyone sweeter.” And, thankfully, she was able to speak without giggling.

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CHANCE STARED AT A point over his brother’s shoulder and remained rigid, his lips firmly pressed together. The wagon was in his line of sight with Danny on the seat, his elbows on his knees. The area was filled with people, too many people. The train was filling up. He hadn’t expected this many to be traveling.

Daniel leaned in closer and lowered his voice. “You can’t mean to pay passage for that mangy mutt. I’m sure there are plenty of dogs in Brokken. Why waste my money?”

Chance had not spoken a word but now was goaded beyond endurance. He raised a brow. “Your money?”

Daniel licked his lips before he cleared his throat. “We’ll take good care of Rascal. Leave him here.”

“Who will care for him? You or Danny?” Neither had ever taken an interest in his dog, or for that matter, any of the other animals on the farm.

“Danny will. You know he’s a good boy who only needs direction.” His gaze traveled to his son, his face beaming. Danny either didn’t see or ignored him.

His anger toward his brother had not abated but grown stronger since a week ago when told he had to leave. Chance shook his head and kept his voice level. “I’m keeping Rascal with me. He’s loaded in the baggage area in a crate, and I already paid ...”

His brother swung his free arm toward the ticket office. “I’m sure they’ll give you the money back.”

“The subject is closed,” he said through clenched teeth without turning his head. He focused on the train beyond the wagon. Daniel had purchased the ticket, without consulting him, and told him he’d found him work. Daniel had been vague about the details.

Chance did not trust his brother and doubted a job awaited him at the end of this trip. But what choice did he have? His brother wanted him gone. In a few minutes, he’d board. The thought of being confined on the train among strangers worried him, and he lingered, wanting to delay the inevitable as long as possible.

He inhaled deeply and let it out slowly, something his mother had taught him to do whenever he “got in a fix,” as she termed it. A group of passengers jostled past, and Chance sidestepped them.

Daniel rubbed his chin and then touched Chance’s arm. “I told you the town was looking for men to work. What I didn’t tell you is they’re looking for a bit more...”

“What do you mean?” His gaze fully met his brother’s for the first time that day.

Daniel appeared embarrassed, something Chance had thought him incapable of. The tips of his ears reddened as he shifted his weight on the cane. “The town is full of women, mostly widows, looking for husbands. I took the liberty of corresponding with a Miss Wanda Waldruff. She’s not a widow woman, but her pa was killed in the War, and she doesn’t have any kin.”

Chance narrowed his eyes. “Women advertised for men?”

“That’s the gist of it. This Miss Waldruff wants to be married... to you.”

Anger surged through him. “I have no intention of marrying Miss Waldruff or anyone else. You had no right to correspond in my name.”

Daniel waved his free hand. “What’s done is done. I figured it’s the only way you’ll find a woman. She’ll be waiting to meet you

when you arrive." He scratched his head. "Well, not right away. The sheriff will be interviewing the men to check their suitability. That's how Miss Waldruff put it."

"I'm afraid Miss Waldruff will be disappointed. I'll explain to the sheriff I arrived under false pretenses due to my brother's deceit." He clenched his teeth so hard that the muscles in his jaw ached.

His brother laughed harshly. "I'm sure she'll get over her disappointment once she learns who you are."

Chance took a step to fully face his brother, his feet firmly planted. "So, if I'm not accepted by this Miss Waldruff, there will be no job at the stockyard?"

"Her pa owned it, and she's been struggling to run it by herself. I'm sure she'll find something for you to do." He searched his pockets and pulled out a packet of letters. "Here's the correspondence, something you can read on your journey, and there's the advertisement." He poked at the clipping torn from a newspaper.

His brother shook the packet of letters at him, and after a moment, Chance relaxed his stance. He'd take the letters. He needed to know what had been said.

To his embarrassment, tears pricked the back of his eyes when his hand touched his brother's. This was not the way he should behave, especially after what their country had just endured, and considering it likely they'd never see each other again. He forced himself to speak civilly. "You were only doing what you thought best." He gave his brother an awkward pat on his shoulder. "I need to board the train."

A mournful wail sounded the moment he spoke. To his surprise, Daniel gripped Chance's arm and gave it a squeeze. "Have faith. It'll work out for you."

Chance adjusted the leather bag containing all his worldly possessions. "I'll send you a telegram when I arrive."

Daniel shook his head. "Save your money. Write a letter when you can."

Chance nodded, walked toward the train, and joined the crowd boarding. Four or five men were ahead of him, and he was the last to board. His eyes took a moment to adjust, and he stood for a moment to orient himself and let his gaze sweep the interior of the car.

The conductor was having none of that and motioned Chance

along. Almost every seat was taken. Where were all these people going? Surely not to Brokken, Texas?

The conductor indicated an empty seat already occupied by a gentleman around his age. Chance glanced around the compartment. Two ladies sat across from the man, one wearing a badge on her suede vest. The other young lady glanced toward him briefly, and dark turquoise eyes met his, disconcerting him. The conductor nudged him forward.

The seated man broke off an animated conversation with the ladies and spoke to him. His flash of teeth appeared more a challenge than a greeting. “A fellow passenger,” he said and rose to allow Chance to store his bag. Before he sat back down, the man gestured. “Do you prefer the window or aisle?”

Neither was to his liking—sitting where people brushed by or where he’d be confined in a corner. Sitting across from the young lady was out of the question. She’d expect him to make small talk. “I’d rather sit next to the aisle, if that suits you.”

The man slid over, and Chance took his seat beside him. Chance gave a vague nod in the direction of the ladies in greeting.

The man next to him extended a hand. “Since we’re traveling companions, allow me to introduce myself. I’m Klint Caper, and these lovely ladies are Mrs. English and Miss Brokken. Mrs. English is the sheriff of Brokken, Texas.”

Chance widened his eyes. “The sheriff of Brokken?”

“You, too?” Mrs. English said. She smiled and gestured at his hand.

Her words confused him at first. He followed her line of sight to the letters he still held with the advertisement on top.

Mr. Caper pointed to it also. “I have one just like it. Here we are, answering the advertisement, along with several more men, I assume.” He swung an arm to indicate the train filled mostly with men. “I am correct that you are one of the proposed grooms?”

Chance shook his head. “No, sir.” He hesitated. His aversion to airing his dirty laundry kept his angry words from spilling forth. He stuck the letters in his pocket. “I’m in need of a job but have no interest in marriage. I’m afraid there may have been a misunderstanding. A Miss Waldruff is under the misconception that I corresponded with her.”

Sheriff English studied him. “Misconception? What exactly do you mean?”

Chance shrugged. “Someone else corresponded with her in my name.”

She gave a half smile. “Miss Waldruff is a lovely young woman. You can explain to her when we reach Brokken. And who knows? You might find her a pleasing companion and change your mind.”

“I heard the sheriff ... is in charge of this arrangement...” He broke off. Maybe he was speaking at the wrong time.

“It’s true I am checking the background of the men coming into our town. However, if you have no intention of marriage, you can handle that on your own. Speak to Miss Waldruff when we arrive.”

He nodded.

The younger lady spoke in his direction. “I don’t believe I caught your name.”

“I’m sorry. I’ve failed to introduce myself. My name is Chance Hale.” He now wished he’d taken the window seat to have somewhere else to focus. The face of the woman who sat across from Mr. Caper filled his vision, and he found it difficult to turn away.

Chapter Eleven

As the train lurched suddenly, Mr. Caper twisted in his seat and caught Chance by his shoulder to steady himself. “Pardon me,” he said, as he released him.

Chance was glad of the jolt. It had helped him to look away from Miss Brokken. He leaned back, lowered his hat, and hoped he was at least partially hidden.

But he had a short respite. Mr. Caper placed his hand on his arm. “Did you say your name was Chance Hale? Chance Hale from the Battle of Gettysburg?”

“I was in many battles,” Chance mumbled. He shrank farther back and tried to escape the man’s scrutiny.

Mr. Caper addressed the ladies sitting across from him. “No one expected him to survive the war. ‘Not a Chance in Hale’ was his nickname.”

The reminder embarrassed him, and he pulled his hat even lower over his eyes.

“Mr. Caper, your language,” the sheriff said.

Mr. Caper laughed. “Consider it Hale, as in his last name. Some of the things he did were unbelievable. Men gave odds of him surviving the War with his exploits.”

Chance’s throat began to close on him. He crossed his arms and blocked out their voices. If anyone else questioned him, he planned to make his escape.

“I believe I’ve heard of you,” the sheriff said. “Can you tell me …”

Chance was on his feet, mumbling an excuse. He’d find Rascal, who was somewhere on the train, in the baggage compartment, wherever that was. He stumbled down the narrow aisle, not looking back.

The sheriff’s words carried to him. “What in the world got into him?”

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DEBORAH WATCHED MR. Hale scramble away and frowned. “He’s

a strange one."

Strange but attractive, although not as attractive as Mr. Caper. The ladies should be well pleased with these two. Certainly, if Mr. Hale rejected Wanda, since he claimed he did not correspond with her, others would vie for his attention

Although his clothes were of a simpler cut than Mr. Caper's and not as well maintained, his build was similar, tall and slim. His hair had been long and shaggy beneath the hat he'd never removed. The one time he'd really looked at her, she'd caught sight of a pair of strangely colored eyes, pale gray lined with navy blue. Unworldly, as if he could see beyond the material world. She shook her head at her fanciful imaginings. Nothing like Mr. Caper's sky-blue eyes that crinkled at the corners with good humor.

She caught sight of Mr. Caper watching her. "I'm sorry. That was rude of me to say."

"Well, if you knew his story ..." He paused and leaned forward. His voice dropped to a whisper. "Some say he killed ... or murdered ... many men. Of course, it's not my place to speak of it."

Deborah gasped and exchanged a look with Victoria. "But isn't that what war is about? The killing of others?"

He shrugged. "There's more to what happened than engagement in battle."

She leaned forward to ask another question until she caught the sternness in Victoria's eyes. It convinced her to let the subject drop.

She dipped her head in Mr. Caper's direction. "I need to close my eyes for a few minutes. I have the most awful headache."

Mr. Caper was immediately solicitous. "Would you like me to fetch you a glass of water?"

Deborah waved his concerns away. "I'm sure the headache will ease shortly." She allowed the back of her head to press against the seat and closed her eyes. Her mind drifted, imagined what life would be like if she, instead of Lavendar, married Mr. Caper. With his intelligence and charm, he'd make an excellent rancher—although she wasn't sure how charm would play into it. Her grandparents would never agree, of course, even though she was nineteen and old enough to make her own decisions. Maybe she could persuade them to move into the cabin by the lake.

No, the cabin was where she wanted to live. Her family had spent many holidays there, before the War, when they were still happy. If she married, she might have a chance to regain a bit of

bliss.

A smile played on her lips. She'd have to convince her grandparents that she no longer needed them, and it'd be easier to do if she married. They could forget their plans to take her to Boston, to marry someone of their choosing. Let them move to Boston, and she, with her new husband, would move into the cabin. She'd be Mrs. Hale.

She gasped. *Mrs. Caper.* She meant Mrs. Caper. How could she imagine that strange man as her husband? A man who may have murdered someone, if what Mr. Caper said was true? She relaxed her muscles and tried to conjure the image of Mr. Caper again. Instead, Mr. Hale's image wavered before her, and she dozed dreaming of him.



CHANCE FOUND RASCAL and made sure he had water and food. The baggage car was stale and strange odors lingered, but Chance didn't leave. He'd wait until darkness gathered beyond the windows to return to his seat, or maybe he'd stay put.

Rascal dug at the boards until Chance pried the slats on top off and lifted him out. His dog greeted his release with enthusiasm.

Chance patted his sides and spoke soothingly. "It's all right, boy. We'll be at our new home soon." Their new home? He felt nauseated at what lay ahead. He had to speak to Wanda Waldruff, tell her it was not he who had responded to her letters. He doubted seriously if she'd want him around after that, no matter how many jobs were available. And what could he do then? Would there be other jobs?

He sighed deeply. There was no use in speculating. With nothing to be done, he pulled his old frock coat out of the crate and shook it out. He used the government-issued coat as a bed for Rascal, as good a use for it as any.

He spread it on the floor to serve for his own bed, and Rascal joined him, curling up beside him. He smoothed the dog's fur and spoke words softly, as much to comfort himself as his dog.

He closed his eyes and searched for the relief of his worries in sleep.

Chapter Twelve

A rough hand shook Chance awake. “No sleeping in here, mister.” The conductor held a lantern and swung it close to his face.

Chance put up an arm to block its blinding light, and a deep, low growl emanated from beside him. “Shh, Rascal. It’s all right.”

“Did you let that dog out? Has he done any damage in here?” The conductor swung the lantern in a larger arc, sending creatures scurrying for the shadows.

“There’s no damage,” Chance answered. He leaned forward with his forehead across his arms, the nausea worsening.

The man jerked him to his feet. “Get your dog back in the crate and then go to your seat.”

Chance grabbed his frock coat from the floor to put back in the crate. The conductor moved closer with his lantern. Chance turned sideways, out of the light, but that did not stop the conductor from touching the fabric, to inspect it.

“I thought it was green.” His voice sounded incredulous. He raised his gaze to search Chance’s features.

For a moment, he didn’t speak. Finally, Chance shrugged. “What if it is?”

The man placed a hand on his arm and spoke quietly, reverentially. “Does it belong to you?”

Chance sighed heavily before he nodded and shook off the man’s grasp. The old frock coat went back into the crate followed by Rascal.

He pressed the boards together the best he could and slammed the heel of his hand against them, hoping they’d hold. “Will you show me the way to my seat?” he asked the man’s shadowy figure.

The conductor gave a nod. “I’ll come back later and make sure your dog is secure. He’ll be well cared for, I assure you. Follow me.”

When they reached the passenger car, the conductor stopped and turned to face him. “May I get you a bite to eat or something to drink?”

“A glass of water will do. Thank you.” As queasy as he felt, food was out of the question.

“I’ll be back in a moment.” The man moved away, and Chance

was left with little light to see by.

He moved so his back was to the outer wall of the passenger car, to feel safer, protected.

The conductor returned with his water. He thanked him and drained every drop. After he gave the glass back to the conductor, he wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. “Goodnight,” he said, with all the politeness he could muster.

The conductor bowed his head. “Goodnight, sir. Don’t hesitate to call if you need anything. I’ll be at the end of the car.” His arm swung to indicate the direction. “I’ll hold the light steady until you reach your seat.”

Chance gave a nod and headed to his seat, guided by the conductor’s light. Not everyone thought poorly of him, judging by the conductor’s treatment. But the conductor didn’t know the whole story, he was sure.

The two ladies and Mr. Caper all appeared to be asleep. He slid into his seat quietly, stretched his legs as far as he could, tilted his hat over his eyes, and soon joined them.

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DEBORAH AWOKE, STRETCHED, and yawned. By the thin rays of sunlight streaming through the window, she noted Mr. Hale had returned sometime during the night. His hat had fallen from his head, and his tousled hair fell in curls across his forehead. He still slept as did Victoria and Mr. Caper. Deborah did not want to disturb them but a trip to the necessary was in order.

Silently, she rose from her seat and moved forward. Mr. Hale’s legs blocked her path. She raised her skirts in anticipation of stepping over when he moved and opened his eyes. He blinked sleepily, and a smile curved his lips as if he’d awakened from a pleasant dream. His gaze found hers, and she froze, mesmerized by his eyes. He did not attempt to look away but remained relaxed, his face open to her. And his smile broadened, crinkled around his eyes, and made her insides turn into a comforting warmth that drew her closer. His legs remained outstretched, and he lifted a hand, as if to reach for her.

Mr. Caper spoke cheerfully for so early in the morning. “Good morning, Miss Brokken, Mr. Hale. I trust you slept well?”

Deborah stiffened, and Mr. Hale, with a visible effort, sat straighter and twisted in his seat to face Mr. Caper. He gave a nod

before his gaze shifted back to Deborah, not meeting her eyes. Awkwardly, he stood and moved backwards, into the aisle. “Sorry,” he mumbled. “I was blocking your path.” His voice was husky, whether with sleep or another emotion, she didn’t know.

Deborah did not trust her own voice. She made her escape without speaking or looking back.

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CHANCE SLID BACK INTO his seat and shook his head, endeavoring to shake the cobwebs loose. He’d been dreaming of a woman ... surely not Miss Brokken, someone he’d only met the day before? He blew a breath out slowly and allowed his eyes to slide shut and endeavored to recapture the dream. He granted himself the luxury of imagining a life with Miss Brokken before chastising himself.

How foolish could he be? His best bet was to steer clear of all women or face more heartache. The faster he got off this train, the better, far away from Miss Brokken.

No woman would have him, not after what he’d done—no decent woman anyway, certainly not Miss Brokken.

But why had she moved toward him in that way, with that look on her face? He shook his head. She was only trying to get by.

The attraction between Miss Brokken and Mr. Caper was obvious, and he could not compete with someone like that. He had everything Chance did not.

He tightened his jaw, surprised at the emotion he felt. *Jealousy* ... he was jealous of Mr. Caper. He almost snorted his derision. Why would he be jealous when he had no plans of marrying any woman?

Let Mr. Caper have Miss Brokken, if he wanted her. All he wanted was to find a job, a job to keep body and soul together, preferably far away from people, especially women. He was tired of their scorn, their questions ... even their admiration. He breathed heavily and noted Mr. Caper chattered beside him, although he had no idea what the man said.

Chance’s hat had fallen on the seat beside him, and he smoothed back his hair and replaced it, pulling it low over his forehead. If he’d had any sense, he would have changed his name. But how was he supposed to know he’d meet someone like Mr. Caper straight off, someone who knew at least some of his past actions?

The anger, jealousy, whatever it was, drained from him, and Mr. Caper’s words finally reached him. “...be there soon,” he said. The

man had his hand on his arm.

Chance stiffened and pulled away. “Sorry, Mr. Caper. I didn’t catch what you were saying.” He spoke softly since the sheriff still slept across from them.

“I was pointing out that if my calculations are correct, we’ll be arriving in Brokken in an hour or maybe sooner.” His smile broadened.

Chance gave a nod at the good news. He’d be able to get away from Miss Brokken as well as Mr. Caper, who, it seemed, never stopped talking.

He rose to his feet, not wanting to be present when the lady returned. “I need to check on my dog.” The excuse seemed to satisfy Mr. Caper, and Chance walked away.

The conductor from last night met him, his face wreathed in a smile. “Good morning, sir.” He leaned in closer. “Would you like a cup of coffee? We don’t offer it to passengers, normally, but in your case, I will make an exception, after what you did for our country.”

Although the coffee would be welcomed, Chance shook his head. He did not want any special treatment, especially for what he had done. “No, thank you, but I appreciate your offer,” he said with an effort. Although he obviously meant well, the conductor didn’t know how misguided he was in his admiration,

The man did not allow him to pass but pulled a watch from his pocket. “Sir, you might wish to know we will be arriving twenty minutes early. We’ve made good time.”

Chance nodded and attempted a smile.

“Are you sure you don’t want coffee?” Another passenger commanded the conductor’s attention, and the man finally moved and allowed him passage.

Only forty minutes until he could escape the train. Relief flooded him as he made his way to the baggage car. Rascal greeted him with a yelp and whine. The conductor had been true to his word and reinforced the crate.

Chance dropped to his knees and stuck his fingers through the slats. This had been a long trip for his dog, as it had been for him. To be confined like this was inhumane, and he kicked himself for allowing it. He should have traveled by horse or wagon, let his dog run along beside him. It was too late now.

He rubbed the dog’s fur, what he could reach. “It won’t be long, boy, and you’ll be free.”

The words were like a stone sinking to the pit of his stomach. He considered again what awaited him when he stepped off the platform, onto the streets of Brokken. He'd have to confront Miss Wanda Waldruff and tell her it was all a mistake. It was doubtful she'd hire him. Afterall, she didn't want someone to work at the stockyard—she wanted a husband.

He sat back on his heels. Perhaps he was wrong to reject the notion of marriage out of hand. Wasn't it possible he could find happiness, and if not happiness, companionship? He held his head in his hands for a moment and cursed himself. He'd momentarily forgotten that was not the problem. It wasn't his happiness but hers that mattered. No woman would ever be happy with him; no one would ever understand what he had done and would look at him with distrust in their eyes. He shrugged. Why not let the woman make the decision? If she wanted to turn down his proposal, it wouldn't be the end of the world. He knew nothing of this woman and maybe he should discover more.

He pulled out the packet of letters, settled back, and began to read as Brokken grew closer. After a few minutes, he looked up, contemplating what he'd read. The wistfulness in the letters touched him, attracted him. Her picture, enclosed in one of the earliest dated letters, showed a young, attractive woman. With such good looks, she was far from desperate. He doubted if she'd accept him, or rather his brother's version of him. But would it hurt to find out, to play the part?

What did he have to lose?

Chapter Thirteen

Deborah lingered for as long as she dared. The sheriff would be coming to find her any moment. When she made it back to her seat, she was relieved to find Mr. Hale missing. Her cheeks still burned from her reaction to his lazy smile. What must he think of her?

But his behavior had been odd also. Perhaps Mr. Hale had been dreaming—unlike her. Some folks dreamed with their eyes wide open, and he must be one of them. He certainly had *not* been reacting to her. His lazy smile and lift of his hand sent shivers down her spine, even now. Flustered, she barely heard Mr. Caper's words. Sheriff Vic had awoken, and she gave Deborah a curious look but, thankfully, didn't question her.

Deborah pulled a book from her carpetbag and opened it to a random page. It didn't matter what page. None of the words made sense to her. Each time someone walked by, she started, thinking it was Mr. Hale. It wasn't until the train let out a long mournful wail that he returned, giving but a nod to indicate his acknowledgment of the others, including her, she supposed.

Even so, her heart beat wildly, from embarrassment, she was sure. She kept her nose in her book, afraid she'd be pulled in by those eyes again. She didn't have to worry. A sideways glance showed he kept his hat pulled low, and his eyes downcast.

The train lurched to a halt after the few minutes from the whistle to the arrival at the depot having stretched to an eternity. The ranch beckoned her, a haven away from Chance Hale and all the emotions he stirred within her. All she had to do was get on the wagon with their foreman, Isaac, and head home. She hadn't counted on the train arriving twenty minutes early and Isaac nowhere in sight.

She joined the crowd on the platform, with only her carpetbag on her arm. Several ladies strolled by when they disembarked, taking a keen interest in the men milling about. Deborah's legs were weak, from her long travel, and she scanned the crowd in vain for Mr. Isaac.

The sheriff touched her arm to gain her attention. "I'll be out to the ranch later, Deborah. I need to sleep in my own bed for a day or

two before I can function again." And she hurried away before Deborah responded.

As she waited on the platform, she spotted Lavendar arriving with Miss Sophia. Deborah stifled a laugh behind her gloved hand and wondered what her reaction would be to Mr. Caper. Unlike the other ladies, Lavendar waited patiently beside Miss Sophia. Wanda stood near them also and stopped for a moment to consider Mr. Caper before her glance moved to Mr. Hale. Somehow, she knew Mr. Hale was her intended. A shy smile landed on her lips, and she dipped her head in approval.

Deborah walked down to greet her, and Wanda gave her a hug, holding to her for a moment to whisper, "Did you happen to meet Mr. Hale?"

"As a matter of fact, I did." She turned to see him only a few feet away.

If she could get him interested in Miss Waldruff, perhaps her heart would cease to betray her. Deborah smiled in his direction and made a slight motion of her head. He took the hint and moved closer.

"Miss Waldruff, may I introduce Mr. Hale?"

To her surprise, he swept the hat, that hat he'd hidden behind, off his head to reveal his unusual gray eyes. His elusive smile returned. To give them a little privacy, Deborah turned toward Lavendar and Miss Sophie. She said words she had no recollection of afterwards.

Wanda did not tarry long, probably remembering that she was not supposed to meet her intended except under Preacher Grisson's watchful eye. Deborah glared at Wanda's retreating back before she remembered she had no need for jealousy. She had no interest in Mr. Hale, certainly not after what Mr. Caper had told her. Mr. Hale would be very happy with Wanda who was an intelligent, kind woman, a couple of years Deborah's senior, and she hoped Wanda would find happiness also. Even though Mr. Hale had said he didn't want to marry, his behavior indicated otherwise.

This was what Deborah wanted, the couple's obvious attraction to each other, but for some reason, pain lingered in her heart. She turned her attention back to Lavendar.

Her friend's breath came in quick gasps, so typical of Lavendar when she became overexcited. "We wanted to meet the train, to escort the men to the hotel. Miss Sophie and I came as quickly as

we could." She put a hand to her chest, as if it could calm her, and smiled.

Mr. Hale stepped closer to Deborah, and she was keenly aware of his presence. When Mr. Caper moved between Mr. Hale and Deborah, she was happy for the distraction.

Lavendar's violet eyes lit up with appreciation, and she gave a warm smile.

"This is one of the intended grooms," Deborah said. "Mr. Klint Caper."

A hand flew up to cover Lavendar's mouth. "Mr. Caper?" A pleasing shade of rose covered her cheeks.

"Mr. Caper, this is Lavendar Lilley whom I understand you've corresponded with."

She moved back to allow Mr. Caper to have a moment of privacy to meet his intended bride. Unfortunately, it put her closer to Mr. Hale.

He cleared his throat and spoke softly. "Someone told me to come over here?"

His voice alone sent shivers up her spine, and she bit her bottom lip to regain control. "Yes, that's Miss Sophia, the owner of the hotel where you'll be staying." Far away from Brokken Arrow Ranch, thank goodness.

More men from the train gathered around, at least twenty. Miss Sophia took charge and spoke.

Deborah took the opportunity to pull Lavendar away. She gave her friend's arm a shake and whispered. "I didn't know all of these men replied to the advertisement."

Lavendar's blush deepened. "You've been gone three weeks, and we had many men, more than we dreamed of, to answer our advertisements. Preacher Grisson has had a time of keeping it all organized. Of course, Miss Sophia and I helped."

Miss Sophia still spoke and gracefully swung her good arm. "Leave your luggage on the platform. Someone will bring it to the hotel in a few minutes."

Deborah frowned at Lavendar and leaned closer to whisper. "Do you have room for all of these men? We're supposed to take the overflow to the ranch. I didn't think we'd need to until the next group arrived."

Lavendar's eyes widened, and then she smiled. "Oh, I forgot you've been gone. Your grandparents agreed to take the overflow.

Some of the men will double up at the hotel."

Miss Sophia continued speaking and now said. "If you'll follow Miss Lilley, she will show you where you will be staying."

Deborah entwined her arm with Lavendar's. For a moment, Lavendar's feet stayed firmly planted. She looked around and smiled at Mr. Caper, and only when he began moving in the direction of the hotel, did Lavendar follow suit. Luckily, the hotel was not far from the depot.

A dog ran ahead of them until Mr. Hale gave a short whistle. The dog returned to walk beside him. Lavendar moved closer, pulling Deborah with her. "What's the dog's name? May I pet him?"

Mr. Hale nodded, and paused to allow Lavendar to kneel, to speak softly, before holding her hand for the dog to sniff. The other men, seeing the hotel's sign, continued their way, including Mr. Caper, leaving the three of them behind.

Lavendar seemed to have forgotten Mr. Caper as she continued petting the dog. "How does he get along with cats? Squirrels? Umm ... rabbits?"

Mr. Hale tilted his hat back with his thumb and glanced at Deborah, a smile playing on his lips. She hoped her face was impassive but knew it was not.

She forced herself to focus on Lavendar. "Dogs chase all of those animals."

"Rascal doesn't chase cats," Mr. Hale replied. "He got along fine with the barn cats at home." His voice held a wistful tone, as if he was homesick.

Deborah had not considered why he'd left home, to travel here to Brokken. Her curiosity was piqued, but she ruthlessly squelched it and decided to leave Lavendar with Mr. Hale. She continued toward the hotel.

Isaac waited for her and jumped down from the wagon seat when he saw her. She ran to him and took his hand. "I'm so glad to be home." Tears threaten to fall, and she pulled back to gently chastise him. "I thought you'd meet me at the depot."

"I've only just arrived in town and saw the group walking toward the hotel. I figured you'd be with them." His smile broadened. "I'm glad you're back, Miss Deborah. I've had a time of it with your grandparents."

Deborah sighed. "You can tell me all about it later. From what Lavendar told me, we're going to have to take some of these men

home with us."

"I've already arranged it with Miss Sophia. That advertisement did its job." His eyes swept over the men crowded around. He dropped his voice. "Wasn't the sheriff going to check them out before we took them to the ranch?"

"Preacher Grisson was supposed to handle that while we were gone. I don't think Sheriff Vic expected so many, though, and I'm not sure how thorough a job he has done. Her father hasn't spoken to you?"

"No. Not a word."

Someone near them muttered, "What's Miss Brokken doing with the darky?"

Another voice answered, "He's the Brokken Arrow foreman."

Deborah twisted around to see who spoke. There were too many men crowded around to be sure.

Mr. Hale arrived with Lavendar, but he had pulled his hat low over his eyes again. His hat hid his hypnotic eyes, and Deborah felt both disappointed and thankful. Although he had stopped near them, she didn't bother introducing him to Isaac. He'd stay at the hotel, and she'd never have to see him again. Even if he stayed in Brokken and married Miss Waldruff, she'd make sure she stayed far away from him.

Lavendar beckoned Deborah, worry in her eyes. "I don't think Miss Sophia wants a dog in the hotel, though I think it'd be lovely." Her worried eyes searched Deborah's, and she stepped closer to whisper. "Although, to tell the truth, it does concern me some. Please don't tell Miss Sophia, but sometimes I bring the babies with me to work."

"Babies?"

"Bunnies and squirrels—those who've lost their mothers."

Deborah nodded in sympathy. Still, she'd rather not have Chance Hale on the ranch where she was more likely to see him. "Speak to Miss Sophia, to see if she will allow it ..." Her words trailed off when she caught sight of Lavendar's pale face.

Deborah didn't want Mr. Hale at the ranch, but neither did she want to put Lavendar's pets in danger. She glanced toward where he stood. Although his hat remained pulled low, she suspected he watched her, and her breathing deepened. She grimaced and turned her back on him. "I suppose Mr. Hale and his dog can stay at the ranch."

Lavendar reacted by giving her a hug.

Deborah comforted herself with the fact that even on the ranch, she did not have to see that man. She would make a wide berth around the bunkhouse if she ever headed in that direction.

On the way home, she'd sit with Isaac up front, of course, so she wouldn't even know Mr. Hale was traveling with them. It was highly unlikely he would speak, and home was a short distance away.

She glanced over her shoulder at the man who caused her such turmoil. The sooner she got to the ranch, the better. She'd stay shut up in the house with her grandparents, willingly, until he married Miss Waldruff or moved on.

Chapter Fourteen

No one gave Chance a say in whether to stay at the hotel or not. Everyone agreed Miss Sophia would not approve of a dog occupying one of the rooms, and so it was settled. It meant he'd have to climb in the back of the wagon, with Miss Brokken sitting in front of him, distracting him. They didn't have far to travel, from what he heard. The ranch lay on the northern outskirts of town.

After they were given refreshments at the hotel, the men staying headed to their rooms. Klint, as he'd now told Chance to call him, chose to go to Brokken Arrow Ranch. After giving everyone a lengthy explanation as to the propriety of staying at the hotel with his intended, though, as far as Chance could figure, Miss Lilley had a home of her own, he climbed in the back of the wagon and sank down beside Chance and Rascal. The other men going to the ranch soon joined them.

Klint was in a happy mood although that wasn't unusual. Chance had yet to see him when he wasn't. The men exchanged stories of battles, even though some had been in the Confederacy and others with the Union army. Chance kept silent, although he had his own stories to tell, and even versions of their own that they knew nothing of.

Klint dug an elbow in his ribs when they passed the Brokken Bank and then the Brokken General Store. He leaned in closer, so close that Rascal shrank away and let out a low growl. Chance shushed him and gave him a pat to let him know all was well.

"Looks like the Brokkens own half the town," Klint whispered.

It made no difference to Chance, who stiffened and leaned away, hoping Klint would notice that he was in no mood to talk.

One of the other men, Joshua Franklin, motioned with his thumb to Miss Brokken on the seat beside Mr. Isaac. He whispered, a little too loudly. "That's the sister. I heard tell her brothers ran off with the town's money."

"It's none of our business," Chance responded and narrowed his eyes at the man. He shifted his position, given himself room to move quickly if need be.

His words didn't diminish the man's beaming demeanor. He

leaned forward to peer under Chance's hat. "Don't I know you? You sure look familiar."

Chance shrugged, pulled his hat farther down, and draped his arms over his knees, forcing the man back.

Klint nudged his ribs again. "This is Chance Hale." He spoke with pride, as if he was some prized hog.

"Chance Hale? That name sounds familiar ..." Mr. Franklin snapped his fingers. "He's that Union Sharpshooter." He fell back on his heels and rubbed the back of his thumb against his lower lip.

Chance jerked his head up to glare at Klint, still sitting too close. That smiling face needed punching. "Why did you tell him my name?" he growled.

Immediately, Klint was contrite, and he leaned even closer. "Sorry, Chance. They were bound to find out sooner or later."

When Chance turned his attention back to the other men, they had fallen silent, and most looked in his direction, some with rounded, fearful eyes.

Chance would ask Mr. Isaac to stop, and he'd walk the rest of the way to the ranch. What he'd do when he got there, he didn't know.

The wagon lurched, and Isaac struggled for a minute to control the horses before pulling them to a halt. The men scrambled from the wagon and, somehow, Chance had no notion how, Klint reached Miss Brokken first and helped her descend from the lopsided wagon.

One glance showed the wheel had broken. Several men gathered to give Mr. Isaac a hand in the unhitching of the mules. When the others gave him a wide berth, Chance hoisted his bag to his shoulder and moved away to the side and waited with Rascal

After a few minutes, Miss Brokken spoke quietly with her foreman. Mr. Isaac tilted his head, took off his cap, and wiped away sweat from his dark brow. Although only early March, the day had been warm.

The sunset in the west filled half the sky, and Chance focused on it. If things did not work out with Miss Waldruff, he'd head west, change his name, and start anew. How he'd do that with no money, no horse, and no rifle, he didn't know. He'd traded his rifle in for a revolver, still in his bag, along with a holster. It had been a foolish thing to do, but he had his reasons. Maybe he could sell the revolver, use the money for a train ticket.

It was possible he might have some luck with Miss Waldruff. She'd seemed perfectly amiable when they'd met. The question was how she'd feel when she learned of his past. She'd have to know before any courting commenced.

And, if she did reject him, he had another option. Mr. Isaac looked like an intelligent, reasonable man. Maybe Chance could work on the ranch for a few months, earn enough money to make a fresh start. He'd have to avoid Miss Brokken, somehow. Even now, she drew his attention, and his dream came back to haunt him, stirred up feelings that rose to the surface to tighten his chest. He cursed himself and took off his hat to run his fingers through his hair.

Mr. Isaac put two fingers to his lips and let loose a shrill whistle, motioning the men over. They gathered 'round, and Chance replaced his hat. He hovered on the edge of the group.

"Listen, men. It's getting late. Miss Brokken has decided to walk the rest of the way home. We have another wagon at the ranch, but these are our only mules."

"Not much of a ranch if you've only got two mules," Franklin mumbled. Several men laughed.

Someone shushed the man, but Mr. Isaac had heard as had Miss Brokken. She flushed with anger and stepped closer.

She enunciated every word clearly. "Everyone has suffered after the War, and we are rebuilding. We can only do that by working together. As most of you know, the town was founded by my father. Although I am not the one in charge and have no say in final decisions, I will discuss any rude behavior with the sheriff and her father, Preacher Grisson."

"You mean we have to work with the Brokkens or else?" Franklin challenged her.

The question hung in the air unanswered except by a steel glint in Miss Brokken's eyes. Chance's breath quickened, and the tightness in his chest increased.

A few of the men moved restlessly, muttering, and after someone gave Franklin a shove, he whipped his hat off his head. "I meant no disrespect, Miss Brokken." After another nudge, he added, "Mr. Isaac."

Miss Brokken shot a glance at her foreman and cleared her throat. "If you don't like our ranch, if you don't want to work together, the Brokken Road that brought you here can lead you

away." She turned on her heel and left them standing there.

Klint grabbed his bag from the wagon and motioned to Chance. "You coming?" He hurried after her, and the other men followed, moving slower.

Chance hung back until he gained control of his emotions and then walked over to Mr. Isaac. "Do you need help with the mules?"

"That'd be greatly appreciated. You have me at a disadvantage. I didn't catch your name."

It hadn't gone unnoticed that Miss Brokken had not introduced him to her foreman. "My name is Chance Hale. I'm in a bit of a dilemma. The other men" –he nodded in the direction they'd gone — "are uncomfortable around me."

"And why would that be?" Curiosity danced in the older man's eyes.

Chance shrugged. "I was a Sharpshooter in the Union army."

The man's forehead creased, his puzzlement evident. "And what does that mean, exactly?"

"It means some consider me a murderer."

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DEBORAH'S CHEEKS HAD not cooled although the temperature dropped as the sun set. An exasperated sigh escaped her lips when Mr. Caper caught up with her. She glanced beyond him but did not see Mr. Hale. All well and good if he decided to head back down the Brokken Road, back to where he'd come from.

Breathless, Mr. Caper spoke. "I'm sorry about Joshua Franklin back there. If he gives any more trouble, I'll take care of it."

She narrowed her eyes at him. "If we need your help, we'll ask for it. The Brokkens are not ..." Her voice faltered. What was she going to say? Not in need of help?

To tell the truth, her family could use help. If folks were to be believed, her father had betrayed the Confederacy, and her brothers had stolen most of the money from the bank.

And the ranch was far from thriving. Not to mention the bank had still not reopened, with no one qualified to run it. How capable was she? How much could she do to aright it all? Tears pricked her eyes.

She sighed loudly and peeked at Mr. Caper. His blue eyes sparkled in the dying light, lifting her spirits.

He moved closer, so close his arm brushed hers. "Are not what?"

He flashed a smile. “Are not in need of help? I disagree. We can all use help from time to time, although from your speech back there, I see you are fully capable of holding your own.”

She pressed her lips together and did not speak until they reached the gate leading into the ranch. None of the other men were in sight. She placed a hand on his arm that felt strong and capable. “Mr. Caper, I do need a favor.”

“Whatever you wish, Miss Brokken.” He placed a warm and comforting hand on top of hers.

She couldn’t repress a smile. “Will you wait here for the rest of the men? The bunkhouse is close to the barn. You can’t miss it. I’m sure supper is prepared, but I’ll check to be sure on my way home.”

“Of course, I will wait. It’ll be my pleasure.”

To her consternation, when she attempted to remove her hand, he took it in both of his and kissed it. She pulled her hand loose, slowly, and bid him goodnight. Mr. Caper was a fine man, but she did not like his flirtatious behavior, especially since he was promised to Lavendar. Her cheeks burned. Wasn’t she the one who had been forward, placing her hand on his arm.

She took a deep breath and walked toward her beloved ranch. It took all her effort not to run all the way home.

Chapter Fifteen

Chance waited for Mr. Isaac to speak, but he said nothing. All the others had moved out of sight. Chance and Mr. Isaac led the mules at a slower pace. The silence between the two men was compatible, the walk pleasant. A cool breeze had picked up and the countryside, although not what he was used to, was appealing. The trees stood farther apart and did not tower above them like those back home. He had an affinity with trees. They'd served him well, especially during the War when he'd shimmy up one to get a better shot. If it'd been a particularly tall one in full leaf, the enemy had an almost impossible task of locating him in his green uniform.

Isaac, slightly ahead, pulled his mule to a stop, and Chance stopped beside him.

The older man tilted his head and removed his cap, swiping his forehead with his arm. "How old were you, Mr. Hale, when the War began?"

"Seventeen."

Mr. Isaac contemplated him for a few minutes, his dark eyes luminous. "How did you become a Sharpshooter?"

Despite all the heartache that had ensued, a smile played on Chance's lips. His selection had been a moment of great honor, had made his family proud.

He looked away before he spoke. "I have ... had eight brothers. Before the War, my brother Jonathan met and married a woman from Wisconsin. When his wife was lying in, for the delivery of their first child, my mother asked me to accompany her there from our home in Missouri." He fell silent for a moment, re-living the happy reunion. Jonathan's wife had delivered a healthy baby boy whom he had not seen since he joined the army.

He passed a hand over his face before he continued. "That was in the summer of 1861, before we knew the full extent—I reckon no one knew what this War would entail. We tarried longer than we'd planned, at my brother's, and I turned eighteen that fall." He moved to get a better view of Mr. Isaac who remained silent, his face composed.

"My brother told me Colonel Berdan was forming a regiment of

Sharpshooters, but the men would have to pass a test to be considered. He said he was going, and I should too. Jonathan had faith in me, more faith than I had in myself. If it hadn't been for him ..."

"Did he become a Sharpshooter?" Mr. Isaac interrupted.

Chance shook his head, and to his consternation, a tear slid down his cheek. The errant tear was brushed away with the back of his hand. "He came close, but not perfect. You didn't get a second chance to put ten shots in a ten-inch circle. Only one of his shots was outside the circle, by less than half an inch, but it was enough to disqualify him." Chance shrugged. "I always thought God was with me that day when I was able to get all ten of mine in the circle, but maybe it was the devil."

More tears pricked his eyes. The stress from the journey, being around so many folks, had taken a toll. Rascal sensed his distress and brushed against his leg. He knelt to pat his sides and stayed kneeling until the threat of tears abated.

"Let's walk on," Mr. Isaac said, as if he hadn't noticed.

Chance climbed to the feet, and they walked for a few moments, long enough for Chance to speak with a level voice. "Missouri was divided over the War, even in our family. Two of my brothers joined the Confederacy—Daniel, my oldest brother, and Paul, who was just two years older than me."

Paul had taught him how to fish. He had shown him the best places to look for worms, and then how to thread the worm on the hook. Most importantly, he taught him how to patiently wait for the nibble, to know the exact moment to set the hook. And later, they'd gone hunting together, but that had been a mistake, teaching him how to shoot. He looked up to see Mr. Isaac watching him.

Isaac's voice was a soothing bass tone. "I know that must have been difficult for you and your family, to fight on opposite sides."

Instead of comforting him, it did the opposite. Memories he'd kept pushed far from the light of day welled up, choking him. He swallowed hard and tried to still the shaking of his hands. He pulled the mule to a stop and leaned against him, as if the mule's strength would give him enough courage to go on.

Mr. Isaac stepped beside him and placed a hand on his back. "Let it out son. You've been holding it in for too long."

With the older man's touch, the dam broke and sobs shook his shoulders. Mr. Isaac remained beside him and spoke words meant

to comfort, but comfort no longer existed for him.

When the tears abated long enough for him to speak, Chance choked out the words he'd never spoken before. "Paul was a gunner for the Rebs. He stood to load the cannon, and men in uniform look alike." Chance lifted a tear-stained face to Isaac and swiped his nose with his shirt-sleeve. "I shot him."

His forehead touched the mule's side. He waited for Mr. Isaac's words to condemn him, but the man remained silent, his hand still on his shoulder.

Dusk was gathering before he lifted his head again. Mr. Isaac pointed him to a nearby stream, and he went to wash the tears away, spending a few minutes to listen to the gurgling of the stream. Rascal had followed him and whined until he took a moment to run his palm over his dog's head, smoothing down the fur. He rose, feeling as if he'd marched twenty miles, as he did that day they advanced toward Yorktown. His weak legs returned him to where the older man stood with the mules.

Mr. Isaac waved an arm toward a trail up ahead. "Come with me, son."

Chance fell in step beside him. "Where are we going?"

"Miss Deborah's brothers have a shooting house near here. You can stay here for a few days. Being alone will do you good."

"You mean I ain't fit to be in the company of others." The bitterness twisted his mouth as he spat out the words. But hadn't he asked for this? To be alone?

He followed Mr. Isaac onto a narrower trail. It wasn't until they reached the cabin that Isaac again spoke. "You need time to contemplate your life and, more importantly, time to forgive yourself."

Chance shook his head. "There's no forgiveness for me. None."

"God's word teaches us to forgive others, and, believe it or not, that forgiveness extends to ourselves. Read your Bible. God's forgiveness reaches all, even you." He searched Chance's face and then held out the reins. "Hold the mules for a minute."

Chance did as he was told. Mr. Isaac entered the cabin and shortly reappeared. "I think you'll find all you need. Did you bring any food?"

Chance nodded. "Enough to get me by until tomorrow."

"Good. I'll be back to check on you." He hesitated a moment. "It'll be all right. Have faith." After patting his shoulder, he led the

mules away.

Chance wiped his nose again with the back of his shirtsleeve. Hadn't that been Jonathan's words to him, right before he was chosen to be a Sharpshooter? Faith had never gotten him anywhere.

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WHEN DEBORAH SAW MR. Hale had not arrived with the others, she rejoiced and thought her prayers had been answered. The next morning, she discovered otherwise.

"Why do I have to take him food?" Deborah asked irritably as she watched Isaac saddle his horse.

He turned to her. As always, Isaac's deep brown eyes contemplated her calmly. "Preacher Grisson has taken the men into town to meet their intended brides. You're the only one here."

"I know, I know. But what is Mr. Hale doing at the Shooting House in the first place? He's supposed to be bunking here."

"It's better for him to be alone." He cinched the saddle and faced her. "Why are you questioning me on this?"

She couldn't tell him that she didn't trust herself around Mr. Hale. Instead, she said, "You know my grandmother would not approve of me visiting a strange man."

"Your grandparents went into town, to help supervise the meetings. We have no choice, and you're holding me up. I need to get into town myself, to get the Jennings brothers to help with repairing the wagon wheel." He had one foot in the stirrup.

Deborah bit her bottom lip. "I can go with you, and we'll drop the food off at the cabin. Give me a minute to saddle my horse."

Isaac swung a leg over and settled into the saddle. He sighed deeply. "All you have to do is leave the food. Don't even speak to him."

She stepped closer, laying a hand on the mare's neck. "Mr. Caper said Mr. Hale killed men ..."

Isaac frowned at her until she stepped back. He pinched the bridge of his nose. "Let him go without then, if that's what you want. I can spare no more time in arguing."

Contrite, she shook her head. "I'll take the food."

"And give him the message, please."

"I will leave a note." She knew it was childish, but she pouted. "Mr. Hale should be helping you, instead of taking it easy in our cabin. It'll be your fault if you come back and find me dead." She

laughed, to take the edge off her words.

"We'll give you a good burial. Now, git. It's almost lunch time." He flashed a smile as he urged his horse forward.

Chapter Sixteen

Isaac didn't know the turmoil he was causing, but she'd promised Isaac, and she never broke her promises. Besides, it was a beautiful day for a ride, and she'd concentrate on that.

But the dread lay in the pit of her stomach despite the beauty around her. Plants pushed their way up from the soil and a few flowers already bloomed. Spring was well on its way, but she barely noticed. Icy knots twisted in her stomach, and her breathing quickened as she neared the cabin. A dog barked, startling her, before she realized it was Rascal, running to meet her.

She pulled her horse to a stop and glanced around. Her glance revealed no sign of life, besides the dog. She dismounted, gave Rascal a scratch behind his ears, and pulled the saddlebag down.

If he'd left, just walked away, her turmoil would be over, but she knew that hadn't happened. Rascal would have gone with him. That man was around somewhere. Hopefully, it was not in the cabin.

Her heart tried to beat itself out of her chest when she climbed the two steps to stand on the porch and face the door. She knocked. No one answered.

"Mr. Hale? Are you at home?" She cursed herself for asking that. At home? This wasn't his home. She rapped again, louder, taking her anger out on the door. When there was still no answer, she entered.

Cautiously, she glanced around. It was difficult to tell there had been an occupant last night. The covers were smoothed on the bed, and nothing was out of place, not even a coffee cup, though the aroma of coffee hung in the air.

She shouldn't have lingered, but a surge of nostalgia washed over her. Before the War, they'd gathered here at Christmas and Easter. The cabin was situated on a knoll, to give a view of the lake below, one the Brokkens never tired of, and even now she was drawn to it.

After she unpacked the food, the aroma of the coffee drew her to check the pot, and she discovered there was some left. Perhaps Mr. Hale had gone to explore the area, and perhaps he'd be gone for

hours. Maybe she had time for coffee.

She poured herself a cup and carried it to the window, to reminisce of happier times, before the war. Her grandparents, her mother's parents, never came, so it had been just them—the Brokkens—her and her father and her brothers, Karl, Curt, and Fritz. One Christmas, Curt and Fritz had carved crude versions of horses and were pleased at her squeals of delight. Karl had been the one who had an artistic eye. He had painted her portrait, and the painting still hung in her bedroom, too painful for her to look at, although she had not had the heart to remove it.

She tried to reconcile her memories of her brothers with their stealing the money from the bank, and, what hurt more, leaving her behind, with no knowledge of where they'd gone. She sighed heavily. Something had to be done soon. The bank had remained closed too long. If her family expected to hold onto it, she'd have to get it up and running soon. What family? She was the only Brokken left. Her grandparents were little help, and sad, but true, she wished they'd been the ones to have left. If not for them, her brothers would have moved back to the ranch instead of staying in town. And things would have been much different.

She sighed. As her grandmother always reminded her, if wishes were horses, even beggars would ride. Wishing for a different past was getting her nowhere.

The past was gone, and she had to get on with living. As Paul said in Philippians, *This one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind, and reaching forth unto those things which are before.*

And she had a lot of reaching forth to do. After a day or two more to rest from her journey, she'd go into town and see if she could make heads or tails of the banking business. With the men staying at the ranch, Isaac should soon have it up and running. Her father's furniture could perhaps be sold to purchase more cattle. Things would work out, somehow.

She needed to forgive her brothers; that was the only way to quit re-living the past and would enable her to move on without them. Isaac had told her, more than once, that forgiveness meant giving up all hope of a better past. She knew what he meant by that. The past could not be changed, no matter how much you wished it could be.

She finished her coffee, washed the cup, and placed it on the shelf, ready to make her escape. The backdoor of the cabin opened,

and Mr. Hale entered with a string of fish and laid them on the small table next to the door without seeing her. He hung his hat on a peg.

She moved toward the front, hoping to make a quick escape. His head jerked up, and she gave a terse smile, her hand on the door. “I brought some food, although I see you are capable of supplying your own.”

“Thank you. I hope you don’t mind that I borrowed a pole and went fishing this morning.”

“Isaac has decided to let you stay here, so you need to ask him what you can borrow. I obviously don’t get a say in the matter.” She frowned at him, to erase the image of those strange eyes that looked back at her.

“If you don’t want me here, I’ll leave.”

Her voice took on a haughtier tone. “No, I consider Mr. Isaac a Brokken. He has been here since before I was born and has my complete trust. If he wants you here, he has his reasons, unfathomable to me as they may be. If I did not trust his judgment and had my way, you’d be long gone, not only from here, but from Brokken.” She gasped, and heat rose to her cheeks. Mr. Hale had done nothing to merit her words—nothing but stir up emotions she’d never known existed.

His fingers combed his unruly hair. “As I said, if you want me out, I’ll go.” His chin tilted up a notch and his eyes narrowed, locked with hers. “I know I’m not wanted around here, and believe me, I plan to leave, as soon as I can.”

She turned back to the door and released the wooden bar holding it shut. “Good day, Mr. Hale.”

He cleared his throat. “Thank you again for the food.”

“Mr. Isaac insisted I bring it.” She twisted her head in his direction. “I almost forgot ... Preacher Grisson wanted us to give you a message.” She had the paper in her pocket, but her fumbling fingers were unable to find it.

“Yes?” he said after a few minutes.

She quit looking for the message and straightened. “Miss Waldruff declines your proposal.”

His hand slammed on the table, and her heart constricted when she saw the forlorn look on his face. Her conscience smote her and kept her rooted to the spot.

He turned toward the stove. “*Have faith.* Where does that get

you?" he asked bitterly as he shook the coffeepot, now empty. He set it down.

Deborah latched the door back. "I'm sorry. I drank your last cup. Let me make a fresh pot for you."

He waved a hand as if to tell her he didn't care. "I'll go clean these." He jerked up the string of fish and went out.

She hesitated and then walked to the wood stove. As she made the coffee, she considered his words. Was it Isaac who had told him to have faith? If so, why?

Mr. Chance Hale was an enigma. Mr. Caper said he'd murdered someone, but wasn't that what war was all about? Men killing men? When did killing cross the line into murder?

She glanced out the window and watched as he cleaned the fish, his head bent to the task. He certainly didn't look like a murderer, although what did a murderer look like? Something had happened to him, of that she was sure. And since she did not know his story, she had no business to judge him. Her emotions were clouding her reason.

All she knew of Mr. Hale was that he stirred something within her that she'd never felt before. Even now, shivers ran the entire length of her spine as she watched him do the simple task of cleaning fish.

Coffee made, she moved away from the window, set a clean cup on the table for him, and slipped out the front door.

Chapter Seventeen

Miss Brokken's words hurt him more than Chance wanted to admit. He probably should leave on foot and find the next town. If he had a hunting rifle, maybe he would have. Instead, he spent a miserable night and slept late the next morning. Even when he woke, he stared at the ceiling, too drained to move until Rascal's barking got him out of bed. He peered out the side window and found he had company coming. He dressed quickly and went to answer the knock.

Klint, Mr. Isaac, and Miss Brokken waited on the porch. They'd brought more food. Miss Brokken and Mr. Isaac, probably noting his disheveled appearance, strolled down to the lake, saying they'd eaten a late breakfast.

Chance left Klint to wash up and to rake wet fingers through his hair. Klint had set the table when he returned.

"You're joining me?" Chance asked.

"Yes, and I'm starving." He sat down with Chance and piled his plate full.

Chance leaned back. Why had they brought food after Miss Brokken told him she wanted him out?

Klint indicated Chance's plate with a wave of his fork. "You planning on eating?"

The aroma from the stew made his stomach growl. He nodded and fixed his plate.

"I made coffee. Let me grab us a cup." Klint jumped to his feet and returned with the pot. "You about ready to return to civilization?" he asked as he poured the coffee.

"Civilization? What does that mean?" Suddenly, he didn't feel like eating and pushed his plate away and focused on his coffee instead.

Klint returned to his seat. "I mean the ranch, the bunkhouse." He paused, indicating Chance's plate again. "You're missing some fine eating. Miss Brokken knows how to cook."

"I'm not hungry. And to answer your question, Miss Brokken does not want me to return to civilization, not on her ranch. I reckon I'll be leaving." He stared into his cup. He'd leave when he

got up enough energy, and he'd better find it soon. His mother had often told her sons if a man didn't work, he didn't eat. He'd mooched off these folks long enough.

Klint raised an eyebrow. "I think you're mistaken about Miss Brokken. She's the one who wanted to bring this spread to you, who was up at dawn cooking."

"Not for me?" He frowned. "For everyone, surely."

"No. The men have returned to town again. That Preacher Grisson wanted to question them and let them spend more time with the ladies. It looks like not everyone was happy after the first introductions."

Chance narrowed his eyes suspiciously. "If they've gone to town, what are you doing here?"

"Do you have to rub it in? The lovely Miss Lavendar Lilley has rejected me."

Chance snorted. "I find that hard to believe."

Klint shrugged. "What can I say? It seems I do not meet her criteria of being a cat lover. She took me to her house and perhaps I complained too much of the cat hair."

Klint probably secretly loved cats but wanted to be free of Miss Lilley. Klint's sights were set solely on Miss Brokken.

Chance took a sip of coffee and casually asked, "What now? Do you plan to stay?"

Klint grinned. "Yes, as a matter of fact. Miss Brokken has offered me a position at the bank. I've had some experience."

Probably with embezzlement. Chance pulled his plate back to him and ate a few bites. After he finished off his buttermilk pie, he gave a tilt of his head. "I guess you heard of my rejection. Miss Waldruff refused to even meet me."

"I thought it was you who had no interest in Miss Waldruff? You said your brother corresponded with her without your permission."

"That's true, but when I read her letters, I felt a bit of hope." He shrugged his shoulders, as if it no longer mattered.

"I'm sure Preacher Grisson had a hand in that. I know he questioned the men about you and probably told Miss Waldruff without softening any of the details. You could explain to her. I'm sure most of what was said were exaggerations."

Chance looked into the depth of his coffee as if it held answers. He shrugged. "Maybe they were not."

"Anyway, if you're ready to join us at the bunkhouse, it would

also suit Mr. Isaac, I'm sure."

"I don't know. Those other men fear me, don't want me around. I saw it in their eyes."

Klint snorted. "That wasn't fear you saw. That was admiration. Heck, even the Rebs admire your shooting skills. Half those men are in awe of you."

Chance didn't believe him. His temples throbbed, and he was ready to be rid of Klint. "So, is that why you came today? To talk me into going to the bunkhouse? Not just to eat all the food?"

Klint grinned and picked up the pot. "Want another cup?"

"Sure." Chance set the cup in front of him. "I'll speak to Mr. Isaac. I'd be less of a burden at the bunkhouse, but I plan to leave Brokken, as soon as I get enough money for a train ticket."

"Is that what you want?"

Chance pressed his lips together. "It doesn't matter what I want. Never has." He lifted his cup.

Klint caught his arm just as Chance brought it to his lips, causing him to spill a few drops. Chance's glare did not seem to make an impression on the irritating man.

Instead, Klint tightened his grasp. "Quit feeling sorry for yourself. If you want something, go after it. Quit making excuses."

Chance jerked his arm away, spilling more coffee. "So, you're asking me to compete with you for the affections of Miss Brokken?"

"What?" Klint's mouth gaped open. He stroked his chin and shook his head, throwing Chance a sly look. "Nope. I wouldn't go that far. However, if you truly wish to meet with Miss Waldruff, perhaps I can talk to her for you."

"Act as a proxy for me? I bet she'd love that, a man who can't even plead his own case." Chance laughed harshly.

"If you'd rather speak to her, do so."

The urge to punch Klint's smiling face was almost impossible to resist.

Chance shook his head. "It won't do any good. Why bother?"

"You were a Sharpshooter, one of the best, if not the best. It helped to end the war. Miss Waldruff may well understand."

"Perhaps she'd understand that part ... but there's more." Chance wrapped his fingers around his coffee cup. "I shot my brother. He was a gunner for the Confederacy." He braced as if for a blow.

When he threw Klint a sideways glance, he saw the man's eyes were compassionate. Klint leaned toward him. "You made a

mistake. Men in uniform look much alike."

"Yes, but I went crazy after that." He rubbed his face. "I wanted to die and did foolish things, tried to get my own self shot, to end my misery."

Klint shook his head, his brows drawn down. "That was the past. Forgive yourself instead of pitying yourself."

"You think I pity myself?"

Klint shrugged.

Chance's anger boiled over. "I'm not pitying myself. I pity my brother for dying so young, his wife and child, for losing him, our family... they had to live with what I had done."

"Lots of people lost family in the War."

Chance ignored him. "And it's not just my brother. I took the lives of men who never had a chance to defend themselves. Shot them down in cold blood. I should have quit, after killing my brother, but I kept shooting that damn rifle."

Klint laid a hand on his arm. "Mistakes were made, by many people. If we kept count of all our mistakes, we'd be living in misery the rest of our lives."

Chance propped his elbows on the table and held his head in his hands. He would not break down in front of Klint. With Mr. Isaac, that had been different. But Klint? Who'd probably marry Deborah Brokken? Who got everything his heart desired? Chance took a shaky breath and steeled himself. He raised his head to glare at Klint. "You have no idea what it's like."

"I might have a vague idea." His face was composed as he leaned closer. "You see, I was a sharpshooter, too. For the Confederacy." He chuckled. "No one's heard of me. We were a ragtag group, not like the elite Sharpshooters of the Union."

Chance's jaw fell slack. "You?"

"Why are you so surprised? You don't think I can't shimmy up a tree?" His laughter filled the room, and his blue eyes flashed.

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DEBORAH AND ISAAC CAME up on the porch and heard the laughter from within. She raised an eyebrow. "Is that Mr. Hale laughing?"

Isaac smiled. "More likely Mr. Caper."

"Should we knock?"

"I believe that would be the polite thing to do."

Mr. Caper opened the door and beckoned them in. Perhaps Mr. Hale had not been laughing, but his face was composed when he stood.

"If you gentlemen have finished eating, I'll clean up the kitchen," she said.

"Before you do that, if you have a moment, I'd like to talk to you and Mr. Isaac." He shot a glance at Mr. Caper and motioned toward the door.

Mr. Caper took the hint. "I'll take a stroll if my presence is not needed." He left.

Deborah waited for Mr. Hale to speak. He did not do so until they were all seated around the table.

"Klint and I have been talking. It made me realize that I'm getting preferential treatment."

Deborah tilted her head. "What? You mean by staying here? Do you want to move into the bunkhouse?"

"If you agree?" His eyes were on her, and her cheeks grew warm.

She nodded. "Of course, I agree." She longed to reach across the table to touch his arm. "I'm sorry for my words yesterday."

Isaac raised an eyebrow at her. She had not told him what had happened.

Mr. Hale visibly relaxed and cleared his throat. "There are jobs around the ranch I will do to pay off my debt."

"Debt?" Mr. Isaac said.

Mr. Hale linked his fingers together. "The use of this cabin."

Isaac gave Mr. Hale a soft smile. "You've only stayed two nights."

Deborah nodded in agreement. "There is no need to pay us back. This cabin was empty, and you were more than welcome to use it."

Mr. Hale shook his head. "No, I will pay for my stay." A warm smile spread to his eyes and released butterflies in Deborah's stomach. He seemed have forgotten Isaac's presence. His gaze remained on her.

She stood and grabbed a plate. "These dishes won't wash themselves."

Chapter Eighteen

Mr. Hale stood to help, but Isaac shook his head. “I’ll help Miss Deborah. It might do you some good to spend time with your friend.” He nodded toward the door.

Mr. Hale did not argue but grabbed his hat and left.

Deborah gave a short laugh while she filled the dishpan from the bucket at the backdoor. “His friend? When did those two become friends?”

“They seemed perfectly at ease with each other when we entered, friends, I would say. Perhaps jealousy between them caused friction earlier,” Isaac said, a smile playing on his lips.

“Jealousy?” Her cheeks heated under his scrutiny and she busied herself with scraping the plates and dishes. The men had left little food. “Why would they be jealous of each other?”

“If I’m not mistaken, they both seem smitten with you.” He laughed and stacked the scraped-out dishes by the dishpan.

“Nonsense.” Heat rose to her cheeks, and she knew it betrayed her. “Well, maybe Mr. Caper is. I’m not sure. He’s the type who flirts with all the ladies.” They both laughed and worked in silence for a few minutes.

When Deborah scrubbed the last plate clean and handed it to Isaac to rinse, he touched her arm. “Normally I would consider this none of my business. However, Mr. Hale spoke to me of things that happened in the War, things you need to know before you consider courting him.”

Her eyes widened in surprise. “I’m not going to court Mr. Hale, I assure you.”

“May I ask why?”

She frowned at him and gave him the washrag to wipe down the table. “First, you know my grandmother would never allow it …”

“And when has that ever stopped you?” Isaac laughed and handed her back the washrag.

She rinsed it and laid it out to dry. “The main reason I would not consider it is because Mr. Caper said Mr. Hale murdered people. I think that’s what he said—murdered, not killed. Although I’m not sure what the difference is.”

Isaac nodded solemnly.

She went to the backdoor and threw out the dirty wash water. She wiped out the dishpan and turned it upside down before she faced him. “Why do you think Mr. Caper told me Mr. Hale was a murderer?”

“Caper, more than likely, wishes to court you. Maybe he’s trying to rid himself of competition. Or, who knows? Maybe he’s the type to spread gossip.” He shrugged. “I don’t know.”

Deborah nodded. “If he’s a gossip, that means he’s a liar?”

“I didn’t say he was a liar. Gossip often has a kernel of truth.”

She considered that, turning it over in her mind. “If he’s not lying, Mr. Hale is a murderer. Murderer or not, he is strange, not like the others. Don’t you agree?”

“Yes, I do. That does not make him a bad man.”

“So, what are you saying? You think I should encourage this man?”

He patted her shoulder. “No. Don’t encourage him until you learn the truth. Sit down and talk with him.”

“Why? I said I had no interest ...” She dropped her gaze to her hands. She’d never lied to Isaac. She would not do so now. “The truth is that he attracts me, more than any other man I’ve ever met. I thought it best to stay away from him. Besides, he has no interest in me.”

Isaac laughed. “The man is smitten with you. I knew that from the moment I met him.”

She gave a snort. “He rarely opens his mouth when I’m around.”

Isaac canted a glance at her. “Did you forget he talked to us a few minutes ago?”

“Because he had something to say.” She shook her head.

“Maybe he has something to say about the War. Ask him. It’s that simple.”

Her fingers intertwined and twisted, but she’d already decided she’d do it. But she knew it would not be simple.

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KLINT CHOSE TO STAY behind to walk to the bunkhouse with Chance. Miss Brokken and Mr. Isaac took the leftovers and headed back. It took only a few minutes for Chance to gather his things, whistle for Rascal, and they were on their way. He’d grown used to Klint’s constant chatter and enjoyed listening to him tell of his

exploits in the War.

When they arrived at the bunkhouse, Klint left without saying where he was going. Chance stored his gear away, fed Rascal, and washed up. The men still had not returned from town. The courting business lasted a long time.

Chance sat on his bunk and wondered if he should start work on his own or wait. Thankfully, Mr. Isaac came to the door and motioned for him. Chance told Rascal to stay and followed Mr. Isaac.

But instead of heading toward the field, Mr. Isaac walked toward the main house. He did not offer an explanation.

Chance, his gut queasy, put out a hand to detain him. “Where are we going, Mr. Isaac?”

“To the Brokken House. Miss Deborah wishes to speak to you.”

“To me?”

Mr. Isaac squinted at him. “I’m a bit nearsighted, but I think I grabbed the right man.”

Chance did not laugh. “Are her grandparents there?”

Mr. Isaac smiled. “Luckily, they are not. They are visiting with neighbors. Miss Deborah pleaded a headache to get out of the commitment.”

“Oh.” He frowned. Why would she wish to speak to him? Had she changed her mind again and planned to kick him out before he even settled in? He tried to sort through the emotions surging through him but didn’t know whether he was more excited or nervous.

The house was different than any he’d seen before, the wood dark and ornate on the outside. Inside, the rooms were brighter, the large windows catching the light.

They paused in the foyer, and Mr. Isaac indicated a coat tree for him to hang his hat on. Chance ran his fingers through his hair nervously and followed Mr. Isaac into the sitting room.

Miss Brokken rose to greet them. She’d changed into a dress of turquoise that perfectly matched her eyes. His heart quickened in response to her soft smile.

Mr. Isaac left them, although Chance suspected he had not gone far.

Miss Brokken indicated the round table beside her that held a porcelain tea service. “Would you like a cup of tea, Mr. Hale?”

He didn’t, really, but he nodded and took a seat across from her

when she sat down.

If she was nervous, she did not show it as she presided over pouring the tea. “Mr. Isaac suggested this meeting.” She paused as if waiting for him to speak.

When he didn’t, she continued. “I wondered if you could tell me about the War.” A soft pink stained her cheeks.

“What do you want to know?” He took a sip of the tea, feeling disoriented, as if in some outlandish book, like *Alice, in Wonderland*.

“I want to know about your experiences in the War.” She took a sip of tea and again waited for him to speak.

Had someone told her, as they had Miss Waldruff of the things he had done? He frowned. “Has Preacher Grisson been speaking to you?”

Her eyes widened, and she shook her head. “No, not lately. Why?”

He set his cup and saucer on the table. “Preacher Grisson told Miss Waldruff ... things about me. I thought he might have talked to you, also.” He shrugged.

Her breathing deepened, and she raised an eyebrow. “What is it you don’t want Preacher Grisson telling people?”

“Some things are best left unsaid.” His tone was angry, and she drew back as if he had struck her. Her reaction unsettled him. “I’m sorry. I’m confused as to why you would want this information.”

She avoided his eyes for a second. “I ... This is difficult to discuss. I need to make some decisions, and I need to understand you better... so I can make my decision.”

He frowned at her words. “Miss Brokken, do you want me to leave Brokken Arrow? Is that what you are trying to decide?”

She glanced down at the teacup in her hands and then up to him, her eyes shimmering. “No, Mr. Hale. I’m trying to decide if I want you to stay.”

Chapter Nineteen

Deborah's cheeks felt as if they'd burst into flames at any second. She lowered her gaze to the teacup again and waited for him to speak.

"You're trying to decide if you want me to stay? In what capacity? As a ranch hand?"

She peered up to see his forehead was a mass of furrows. She'd hoped he'd understand her intentions a little faster.

She placed the cup on the table beside her. "Not exactly. I like you, Mr. Hale. I want to get to know you better."

His frown deepened. He shook his head. "My plans are to repay you for your hospitality, and I hoped perhaps I could get hired on as a ranch hand, just long enough to make enough money for a train ticket. You do not wish to get to know me better."

She tilted her head. "Are you used to making decisions for people?"

His throat was dry, and he picked his cup up to drain it of the tea. "Yes, unfortunately, I *am* used to making decisions for others. You want to know what I did in the War? *I decided* who lived or died. I didn't give them much choice at all in the matter." His angry eyes shot shards of glass into her heart.

She put her hand to her chest to ease the pain. "But I'm confused. Isn't that what war is about? Men shooting other men?"

He passed a hand over his face and rested his elbows on his knees. "There are different ways to wage war. One way is to give the other side a fair chance. War should not be about killing your enemy but *defeating* your enemy, forcing them to surrender, not utterly destroying them. And, yes, men are killed, but that's not the purpose of war." He fell silent.

She puzzled over his words. "Mr. Hale, I'm sorry, but I don't understand."

He twisted his head to look at her and then straightened and leaned back in the chair. "I was a Union Sharpshooter and picked men off one by one, destroying them. And not just them, but their families."

A numbness enveloped her, but she was able to nod and say

softly, “I see.”

He also spoke softly. “So, what now?”

Tears welled in her eyes, and she blinked them away. “I need time to think about this.”

He didn’t move, seeming to have fortified himself. “I want to be sure I fully understand our conversation, also. Are you telling me that I have hope of winning your affection? And that is why you are questioning me?”

She bit her lip, and her cheeks burned even more, if that was possible. “Yes, Mr. Hale. We have so many obstacles in our way, but yes, I’m asking you, well, I know you were not interested in marrying, but I ... I hoped ...”

“Perhaps I can be persuaded to marry.” He smiled his elusive smile that warmed her soul, but then his face fell. “That is if you can live with the fact that I was a Sharpshooter. But there’s still something else you need to know.”

An icy claw closed over her heart when she studied his face. “Yes?”

His breathing deepened, and he pressed his fingers to his temples as if his head ached but did not speak.

“Please tell me, Mr. Hale.”

“My brother was a Confederate gunner. I shot him.” He shrugged his shoulders.

“You accidentally shot your brother?”

His eyes became glazed. “No, it wasn’t an accident. I raised my rifle and aimed it at his head—”

“Chance! Please!” Tears streamed down her face although she wasn’t sure when she’d started crying. She fumbled for her handkerchief.

He looked at her with dull eyes. “I didn’t know he was my brother when I pulled the trigger, but it was no accident that I killed him.” It appeared his legs had forgotten how to work when he struggled to his feet.

“How do you endure it?” she whispered.

“Not very well at all.” The sense of loss, deep in his eyes, constricted her heart.

She stood and moved to him, to touch the back of her hand against his cheek. The desire to pull him into her arms, to offer him comfort, grew. With an effort, she stepped back. “I’m sorry I forced you to speak of such a painful subject.”

“You needed to know ... in order to make your decision.” His fingertips touched hers, sending a tingling up her arms. “Goodnight, Miss Brokken.”

She opened her mouth to speak, but he was gone. The steps upstairs seemed insurmountable, but she made it to her room and fell across her bed and sobbed.



CHANCE LAY IN HIS BUNK and stared at the ceiling. The whirlwind of emotions had yet to die down. That Deborah had feelings for him, might be willing to marry him, lifted his heart, and then the memory of shooting Paul drove it back into the deepest pit.

And guilt for what had he had put Deborah through. The tears streaming down her face rent his heart. When she recovered her senses, her decision would be clear—she’d never see or speak to him again.

He sighed so deeply someone whispered harshly to quiet down.

Mr. Isaac had told him no sin was unforgivable. He thought of Klint. The Confederate sharpshooters had never been an organized regiment. Klint had not made as many kills as he had, not nearly as many, but he had killed men in the same way. Somehow, Klint had forgiven himself.

Perhaps if one of the men had not been his brother Paul, it would have been easier for him. But when all was said and done, what difference did it make if it was Paul or some other man? Everyone he shot had family who mourned them. Killing Paul had exposed that truth.

Perhaps the hardest part of forgiveness was that he could have stopped the killing when he realized how wrong it was. But he didn’t; instead, he increased his kills. He had longed for, prayed for death, somehow, someway, but he had not died, no matter how many fool-hearted chances he took. Exposing himself to more and more danger did not destroy him but elevated him to the status of hero.

Some comfort could be gained by telling himself it was all part of the war effort. The comfort was almost meaningless. The scars he carried would never be alleviated. And if he married...*Deborah*, he whispered aloud...wouldn’t she be asked to carry the same scars, share in the same pain? And if they were blessed with children, when he told them, and he would tell them, no matter how painful

to them or to him, what would be their reaction?

Perhaps, he should walk away to spare others the pain. God help him, he didn't know if he possessed enough strength or sense.

He sighed deeply again. Deborah would not choose to join her life with his. What woman in her right mind would do so? No, he would walk alone the rest of his life.

Sleep finally came in the wee hours of the morning, and his dream was familiar, pleasant, the same dream as the night he spent on the train, a dream of Deborah.

Chapter Twenty

Deborah cried herself to sleep. Even her grandparents, who usually noticed nothing out of the ordinary, remarked upon her appearance at breakfast. She explained it away by saying she was coming down with a cold. She walked into Brokken, stopping at the knoll that overlooked the town. She lingered for thirty minutes, hoping the cougar she'd seen before might make an appearance. That day, for a cougar to come so close, to watch her, and to slip silently away seemed almost a sign from God, one she had needed at the time. But today, the cougar made no appearance.

Would she have taken it as a sign if it had? Would it have helped her to decide?

She stopped in at the bank, although she had no energy to pour through books filled with numbers.

Klint was there and looked up from the account book in front of him and smiled. "Miss Brokken! Good morning."

His forehead furrowed, and he immediately moved around the counter to come stand beside her. "Are you feeling unwell?"

She ignored his question but forced herself to indicate the work he'd been doing. "Are you making headway?"

"Some. Leave it in my hands, and I'll have the bank open in a couple of days."

He stood too close, and she stepped away. "I know I said I'll help today... but I do feel unwell."

His eyes filled with warmth as he regarded her, those blue eyes that had set her heart aflutter when she'd first met him. Why did she prefer Chance Hale over him? Her heart made no sense to her head.

She took a moment to wind the cuckoo clock. "As a matter of fact, I am going to see the doctor."

"It's good to know Brokken has a doctor."

"To tell the truth, the doctor was killed in the War, and his wife took over his practice. She's quite capable," she said to the surprised look on his face.

He inclined his head. "I'm sure she is, as are all the ladies of Brokken."

His words made her blush for an unknown reason. When he moved toward her again, she backed away. “I’ll be by later, when I feel better.”

She hurried out the door and continued down Main Street. More people were out than usual, and it took her a moment to realize the potential grooms were making repairs on storefronts. She’d forgotten them in her distress.

To her friends she nodded in greeting, but did not linger to speak, even when she passed Wanda Waldruff. She was glad when she reached the old brothel where Miss Abby practiced medicine.

Abby greeted her and stepped back to survey her. “Are you ill?”

Deborah loosened the bonnet strings and flung her bonnet down on the teak bar top. “Folks keep asking me that. I suppose I must look a mess.”

Miss Abby led her to the kitchen. “Lucky for you, I just made scones. A couple of those and a hot cup of coffee will do wonders for what ails you.”

Deborah sank into a chair, and Miss Abby set the scones on the table. “There’s nothing better than fresh butter and orange marmalade on a scone. Please, help yourself.”

To Deborah’s consternation, her tears burst loose. Miss Abby draped an arm over her shoulders, and Deborah turned to face her friend, lifting her tear-stained face. Miss Abby stroked her hair and pulled her close. She did not speak, and Deborah was glad of it, knew she’d not be able to answer until she gained control of her emotions.

Miss Abby smelled of lavender, and after a moment, Deborah’s tears abated. She pulled away and found her handkerchief.

Miss Abby took a seat across from her. “I remember Vic said your brothers left you a jar of orange marmalade. That must have set you off.”

Deborah traced a pattern on the tablecloth listlessly and didn’t reply.

“Is there something you want to talk about?”

She bit her lip. How could Miss Abby help her with this. Before she could form an answer, the backdoor opened and Sheriff Vic came in.

“Thought I smelled fresh scones. Thanks, Abby.”

“Who said I made them for you? And for heaven’s sake, don’t take them all. I have company, if you didn’t notice.”

“Good morning, Deborah. You look like something the cat drug in that the kittens wouldn’t have.”

Abby shot her friend a frigid look. “Vic! My goodness. Don’t you see something is troubling her?”

The sheriff took a seat at the table. “Yes, and I can guess what. Man trouble. If you want my advice, Deb, stay away from all men.”

Miss Abby frowned. “Do not listen to her. Not all men are scumbags.”

The sheriff slathered a scone with butter. “Maybe not, but they all bring heartache, in one form or another.”

Abby’s red face indicated her anger. “Vic! Maybe you need to go.”

Deborah held up a hand. Their banter had lifted her spirits, and she attempted a smile. “No, that’s all right. I agree with the sheriff. Love brings its share of heartaches.”

Miss Abby blinked as if tears were in her eyes. “Yes, but great joy… if you find the right one.”

Deborah’s lip trembled. “What if you find the right one, but it doesn’t work out?”

Sheriff Vic laughed. “Klint Caper flashes those big blue eyes of his, and you fall under his spell. Then along comes Chance Hale, and he’s hiding something. A little mystery in a man is always intriguing to a woman.”

Abby smiled. “That’s true enough.”

Sheriff Vic took a bite of her scone. “I was suspicious of Hale from the start,” she said to Abby. “He kept his hat pulled down low, as if he didn’t want to be recognized

Miss Abby prepared Deborah’s scone, as if she was a child. In the older woman’s company, she had begun to relax, although she’d twisted her handkerchief into knots.

Abby remained by her until she’d poured Deborah a cup of coffee and urged her to eat. Deborah took a bite and found the scone delicious. After Abby rubbed her palm over her back, she took a seat next to her.

As Deborah continued eating, Sheriff Vic gave a nod of approval, at her appetite, Deborah assumed. “I did some checking the past couple of days since we got home. I found out some information about Chance Hale.”

Had it only been days since they’d returned? It seemed an eternity for Deborah. She nodded. “He told me some things about

himself."

The sheriff motioned at Deborah, her third scone in her hand, if Deborah had counted right. "Do you want to tell Abby or should I?"

Deborah waved her permission. She was sure she couldn't get the words out without tears.

The sheriff's eyes sparkled. "Chance Hale is a war hero. He saved countless lives, getting the Union troops out of dangerous positions. And you know, you could say he saved Confederate lives if you consider that because of him and others like him, the War ended. It could have dragged on for many more months, if not years." She took a swig of coffee before continuing. "He served under Colonel Berdan's command as an elite Sharpshooter, and from what I understand, is highly decorated."

Deborah's eyes widened in surprise at this version of Chance.

Abby frowned in her direction and cleared her throat. "I don't understand. Is Mr. Hale the one who has you in this state, Deborah?"

The sheriff laughed and answered for her. "Coming home, on the train, you should have seen them. As soon as they set eyes on each other, they were infatuated, as if Cupid shot an arrow into their hearts. But somehow, the arrow has broken. Am I right, Deb?"

Abby's gaze traveled from the sheriff to Deborah, still frowning her puzzlement. "You mean she formed an attachment to Mr. Hale that quickly? And then he has broken her heart? In less than a week?"

Deborah's cheeks burned, and the tablecloth again became the object of her attention.

The spoon clinked against the sheriff's cup as she stirred in sugar, a pleasing sound. "You remember how it was with Jonathan and me? A lot can happen in a week."

At the bitterness in the sheriff's words, Deborah raised her head and found her voice. "Are you saying you were not happy with Sheriff English?"

Sheriff Vic studied the coffee in her cup. "Jonathan and I met and were married within a month. Turns out, he wasn't what I expected."

Deborah had never known, had always thought their marriage a happy one. She bit her bottom lip and contemplated the sheriff's words.

Miss Abby shook her head. "I'm sorry, but I still do not

understand. If you like him, and he has such an excellent background, why are you so upset, Deb?"

Deborah fortified herself with a gulp of coffee. "The sheriff is right. I was attracted to Chance, Mr. Hale, from the moment I met him. Isaac saw that and urged me to talk to him since Chance had told him some of what happened in the War ... but it was a different version than that given by Sheriff Vic. Isaac thought I needed to know, before I ... well, behaved foolishly."

Deborah set down her cup and traced a pattern on the tablecloth again. Thankfully, the ladies didn't rush her but waited patiently for her to continue.

Not looking up, she braced herself and spoke quickly. "Something terrible happened to him. His brother was a Confederate gunner, and Chance shot him." She firmed her lips to stop their quivering. When she glanced up, even Sheriff Vic's eyes held tears.

Abby stroked her arm. "Poor man! What can we do to help?"

Deborah smiled at her offer but shook her head sadly. "It's up to Chance. Until he forgives himself, there can be no future for us. I've considered the things he told me and can accept them, but he has to heal. I am too broken myself to help."

Miss Abby shook her arm. "Deborah, every resident of this town, except the newcomers, know how the name of Brokken came about."

Embarrassment heated her cheeks. Her great grandfather would be ashamed of her. Wilhelm Brecheisen came to America from Germany and promptly got into a fight with another man, coming out on the losing end with a broken hip. So many called him Broken that the name stuck. However, her grandfather changed it a bit when he added the "K" in the middle. The K, he told his family, stood for *kein, "*not" in German. He declared he was not broken and never would be.

Had Deborah inherited any of her great grandfather's strength and resiliency? Perhaps she needed time and patience with herself. The turmoil with Chance had taken a toll.

"So, help us to understand. Are you willing to allow Mr. Hale to court you?" Abby leaned back in her chair.

"I don't know. His pain is too great." A tear slid down her cheek.

"What does your heart say?" Abby asked.

Deborah blushed. "I want to get to know him better."

Abby smiled. “You can do that, slowly, and maybe we can help him in some way, or help you to help him.”

Deborah’s heart lifted, and she smiled and nodded.

The sheriff frowned. “To tell the truth, if you two plan on courting, I’m not comfortable with Mr. Hale living at the ranch, not if he is upsetting you so. We must remedy that situation.”

Deborah gasped. “Make him move? I won’t agree to that.”

Sheriff Vic grinned and lowered a hand, palm down, to calm her. “No, not him. You. Move into town, into your brothers’ house… well, it’s your house now.”

“Leave my grandparents?” She snorted. “They’d never allow me to live alone in town.”

Abby refilled her cup without Deborah asking. Her appetite returned, and she reached for another scone.

Sheriff Vic grinned at her. “If you think you can bear having me around, I could move in with you.” Her eyes searched Deborah’s, questioning.

Sheriff Vic gave her strength, just what Deborah needed. And, as an added benefit, she’d be closer to Abby, almost like the mother she’d never had, although Abby was only a few years older. She blinked away the forming tears. “I would love that.”

“I wouldn’t be so sure you want to have her around,” Abby said. She slapped her friend’s hand away from reaching for another scone. “She’s bound to eat all your food.”

Deborah laughed. “Living in town might be best, anyway. I hired Mr. Caper to help out at the bank, and I need to keep an eye on him.”

Abby nodded. “That’s what you can tell your grandparents. They’d be sure to understand that. I’ll go with you, to speak to them, if you think it would help.”

Deborah nodded. “I’m sure it would. Thank you.”

The sheriff leaned toward her. “Let me give you another piece of advice. Hire more employees, a lady or two, at the bank. Do not work with Mr. Caper alone.”

“Why? Did you discover something in his background?”

Sheriff Vic smiled. “No, but he’s quite the ladies’ man. I wouldn’t trust that man as far as I could throw him.”

Deborah laughed. “I have hope that he’s more trustworthy with money. I gave him a key to the bank.”

“I’m sure he’s fine in that department. Did you know he was a

sharpshooter also? On the Confederate side."

Deborah shook her head. "He hasn't mentioned it." Perhaps that's why Klint and Chance had drawn closer.

Sheriff Vic pushed back her chair. "Well, there's no time like the present."

Deborah blinked in surprise. "What do you mean?"

"If Abby does not have other plans, we'll go to the ranch, pack you up, and get you settled in by tonight. The house is fully furnished. You only need to pack your clothes. And while you two take care of that and talk to Deborah's grandparents, I'll pay a visit to Mr. Hale."

Emotions threatened to drown Deborah. All of this was happening too fast. "What will you say?" Deborah could not bear hurting Chance again.

"I will tell him he may visit tomorrow evening, if that suits you? However, I will make it clear it will be under my supervision."

Deborah breathed a sigh of relief. "That will suit me fine." Her heart pierced with such joy, tears came to her eyes.

Abby touched her arm. "Deborah, what's wrong now?"

But it was Sheriff Vic who answered with a laugh. "I think Cupid shot another arrow. Maybe this one won't break."

Chapter Twenty-one

Chance borrowed a horse from Mr. Isaac, and they rode out to check the cattle. Although the herd was small, the potential was there. They discussed which cows to cull to strengthen the bloodline. Mr. Isaac understood cattle better than Chance did, and he listened attentively to the older man's words.

A cloud of dust from the south indicated another rider's approach. Worry lines appeared across Mr. Isaac's forehead. "Ride out and meet whoever that is," he told Chance.

He needed no urging. Fear something had happened to Deborah propelled him into the saddle and on his way, almost before Mr. Isaac had finished speaking.

It was the sheriff, reinforcing Chance's fear. But the planes of her face were smooth, calming him. Chance greeted her and waited for her to speak.

Her first words surprised him. "Take off your hat."

Puzzled, he did as he was told. She continued surveying him. He blinked. "Did you want me to take a message to Mr. Isaac?"

"No, it's you I wish to speak to." She adjusted her seating and looked into the distance. "I've spoken to Deborah this morning, and some decisions have been made."

His heart sank. This was Preacher Grisson's daughter. He'd convinced her, just as he had Wanda, that his actions in the war were unforgivable. He didn't answer but twisted his hat around and around and waited for her to continue.

"Deborah owns a house in Brokken, and she's moving there as we speak."

Tears burned the back of his eyes. She wanted to get as far away from him as possible and who could blame her? He nodded his defeat. "I'll pack and leave. There's no need for Miss Brokken to move away, to get farther away from me. I'm the one who needs to go."

The sheriff snorted. "No, you foolish man. Deborah is moving to the house in Brokken at my suggestion. I'm moving in with her for a while and will supervise the courting."

"The courting? With me?" If they'd not been sitting on their

horses, he might have hugged the woman.

The sheriff laughed. “Be at the Brokken house in town at precisely eight tomorrow night. Understand?”

“Yes, ma’am.” She reined her horse, as if to ride away.

He stretched out an arm to stop her. “Just one question.”

“What?” she asked, impatience in her voice.

“Why did you want me to remove my hat?”

The muscles in her face twitched, as if she struggled for words. She finally spoke. “You need to let the world see who you are, a War hero, not someone who needs to hide.” She chuckled. “Put it back on now. The sun gets pretty hot in Texas, even in March.”

He turned and rode back toward Mr. Isaac, forgetting to bid her good day. She sniggered and called after him. “And your eyes are too pretty to keep hidden.”



KLINT HAD NOT BEEN happy to hear Chance would be visiting Deborah but had finally accepted it and more—he let Chance borrow his best suit. Mr. Isaac told him to take the buggy instead of walking.

The Brokken house in town was even more impressive than the one on the ranch. He stood on the porch and hesitated. Was this the right thing or would it only lead to more heartache?

But he couldn’t leave now when he’d found himself here, a poor farm boy from Missouri, about to knock on the door of the most beautiful woman he’d ever seen.

Before he gained the courage to knock, the door swung open. Deborah smiled, lighting his insides with fire. “Aren’t you going to come in, Mr. Hale?”

She reached out her hand, and he gladly allowed himself to be pulled through the doorway. When their fingers intertwined, she moved closer. His head bowed, and her soft lips yielded to his.

“Deborah Brokken!” Sheriff Vic’s voice rang out. She sighed heavily. “This is going to be more difficult than I thought.”

Even with the sheriff glaring at him, it took a moment for Chance to release Deborah. Their fingers remained intertwined, and the way Deborah gripped him, Chance knew she was never letting go.

Brokken Brother: Fritz and Lydia

December 1867

Chapter Twenty-two

Fritz Brokken turned his horse onto the Brokken Road and pulled up. He'd ridden long and hard, and both he and his horse were exhausted and dusty from the journey. He took a minute to pour water from his canteen onto his bandana and wiped away some of the dirt, even though the water was freezing cold. The temperature had plunged last night. With no coat, he shivered and rubbed the numbness from his arms.

Not two days ago, he'd been told Klint Caper was in Brokken. Fritz had no idea which house he lived in or else he would have arrived in the dead of night and been in and out quickly.

All he'd been told was that Klint worked at the Brokken Bank. Fritz chuckled at the irony before becoming serious again. As far as he could figure, his best plan of action was to ride boldly into town, right up to the very bank he'd stolen from—stolen the hard-earned money from the good folks of Brokken.

Fear pounded in his ears, although he'd grown used to that during the War. His hands would remain steady; it'd only been when he'd volunteered as a sharpshooter that his hands had shaken. Shooting unsuspecting men was not something he could stomach. He'd requested a transfer after his first foray and was granted it quickly. Being Franklin Brokken's son had its advantages then. Today, his father's name was but one more hindrance.

He shifted in the saddle, his teeth chattering, and heard the comforting creak. There was something solid about a saddle. It held you in place and kept you from sliding off the back of the horse. He patted the mare's neck and spoke a few soothing words.

They could do this, him and his horse. All he had to do was stay in the saddle. He steeled himself for the ride into town and urged his horse forward.

He was surprised at the number of horses and wagons in town. He came to a stop outside the bank and dismounted. When he tied his horse to the hitching post, he whispered he'd be back soon. He

prayed his words were true as he stepped onto the boardwalk and opened the door to the bank.

Lydia Walsh was counting money into a customer's hand. After she bid the man good day, the lobby of the bank was left empty except for Fritz and Lydia. He had not expected to see her, and his heartbeat quickened.

She smoothed down her dress and patted her golden curls before turning to face him with a false smile that didn't reach her eyes. The smile faded away when he strode toward her. Her lips parted, and her gaze met his.

Before he reached her, Deborah and Klint Caper came out of the conference room, their heads bent together. Fritz stopped and pulled his gaze away from Lydia.

Deborah held a ledger and stopped and blinked before she thrust the ledger into Klint's hands. She ran toward her brother.

"Fritz!" Tears streamed down her face.

Fritz caught his sister in his arms and swung her around. His gaze met Lydia's blue eyes, and his heart thundered in his chest.

How he wished things could have been different, that he could greet Lydia, but she would only interfere with his mission. He wrenched his gaze away and hardened his resolve. He had to stay focused.



WHEN FRITZ CAUGHT HIS sister in his arms and swung her around, Lydia remained frozen. Her still posture hid the emotions swirling inside—at least, she hoped it did. Fritz glanced at her over his sister's shoulder but did not speak and neither did Lydia.

Instead, with his arm still around his sister's waist, he moved toward Mr. Caper and grasped his hand, "Klint! Fancy meeting you here."

His grin wide, Mr. Caper clasped Fritz's shoulder. "Colonel Brokken, it's good to see you."

The door swung open again, and Lydia startled.

Sheriff Vic stepped over the threshold. "Fritz, you are under arrest."

She gasped although she should not have been surprised. Everyone knew the Brokken brothers had robbed the bank. What was surprising was how Fritz rode back into town, to risk his freedom, and for what? Lydia's heart constricted when the look of

distress appeared in Deborah's eyes.

Deborah looked from her brother to the sheriff. "Wait, Vic. How did you even know he was here?"

The sheriff had one hand on the handle of her gun, still in its holster. "Lots of folks saw him riding boldly into town, like butter wouldn't melt in his mouth. Calvin happened to reach me first."

A flash of anger appeared in Deborah's narrowed eyes. She stepped between Fritz and the sheriff. Lydia longed to help her friend but had no idea how.

It wasn't that she wanted to help Fritz. He'd ridden away without a word to her. And not a telegraph, not a letter, during all of these months. She scoffed. Why would she want a letter from a thief?

Deborah looked to Lydia, as if for support, and then back to the sheriff. "If he rode into town, don't you think that means something? Why would he do that? Don't arrest him until you find out. Please."

Fritz remained composed, standing next to Mr. Caper. The only tell that he was agitated was a crease between his brows.

Iron glinted in Sheriff Vic's eyes as she pulled out the cuffs. "We can question him over at the jail."

Deborah grabbed her arm. "Do you need to cuff him?"

The sheriff shook off her hand and moved toward Fritz who had remained silent until now.

He took a step back and raised a brow. "Do you mean to arrest me? For what?"

Sheriff Vic all but shook a finger in his face. "Don't play innocent with me, Fritz. You and your brothers robbed the bank."

His forehead furrowed. "Robbed the bank? Why would we do that?" He glanced to Deborah and back to the sheriff. Lydia could have sworn he was telling the truth, if she hadn't known better.

The sheriff grimaced and snorted. "You tell me, Fritz. Now hold out your arms."

Slowly, he did as he was told. "I assure you this is a mistake."

Sheriff Vic clicked on the cuffs, and Fritz lowered his linked arms in front of him. The cuffs emphasized the thinness of his arms. For the first time since he'd entered the bank, Lydia noticed he'd lost weight and wore no coat.

Lydia puzzled over his appearance. She longed to believe him, longed with every ounce of her being, but how could it be a

mistake? He'd been gone nine months. As far as she knew, he'd never contacted Deborah, certainly never contacted her, or anyone else in the town.

Her thoughts were interrupted when Mr. Caper took her arm and pulled her to the wall at the back of the room. He probably felt as if they intruded on a family matter, as did she.

Fritz looked around, as if confused. "Where are Curt and Karl? Curt sent me to New York, to apprentice under a friend of his."

"Apprentice for what?" Lydia asked, without thinking. Heat rose to her cheeks when the sheriff sent her a sharp look. She shrank farther into the corner and linked her hands in front of her.

Fritz smiled vaguely in her direction before addressing the sheriff. "Curt wanted me to become a stockbroker. He hoped we could somehow infuse money into the town, help it to grow."

"And you stole the town's money to help the town?" The sheriff's eyes were incredulous.

Deborah stamped a foot. "If that's true, why didn't you tell me? I'm your sister!"

Lydia commiserated. Why hadn't he told her, if the feelings he professed for her were true? His words only served to break her heart—no, it'd already been broken, split asunder, and was incapable of breaking further. She refused to shed another tear over Fritz Brokken. If he'd run off to New York without a word to her, with no explanation, how could things ever be the same between them?

"I can explain..." Fritz said and shot her a sideways glance, as if reading her thoughts. His eyes clouded with pain.

Deborah's eyes glinted with anger, and lit anger in Lydia's chest. "And not one letter from you! Not one word. And where are Curt and Karl?"

Fritz looked abashed. "Curt and Karl were supposed to fill you in on the details." He gestured with his hands, and it almost appeared his brown eyes glistened with tears.

Lydia's anger dissolved, and her heart constricted. Tears pricked the back of her eyes.

The sheriff nudged him in the back. "You can tell the rest of your story in jail. Get going."

Chapter Twenty-three

Fritz bit his bottom lip to stave off the tears. When was the last time he'd cried? The events of the last few months had taken a toll on him physically and emotionally. And seeing Lydia had made it more difficult to confront Deborah than he'd first imagined. The pain in the girls' eyes was evident, and to know he was the cause troubled him.

And then to walk down the boardwalk, with the cuffs drawing stares and town folks whispering, increased his agony. He did not recognize many of the people in the streets. He had expected the town to be sparsely populated, the way it had been when he'd left it.

Without a coat, he shivered in the cold, although he suspected his shivering stemmed from more than the cold. His shoulders straightened, as if of their own accord. He was here on a mission and had to focus. His brothers needed him, and he would not fail.

The sheriff walked behind him, her pistol holstered, although she occasionally pushed him along. Deborah and Klint followed until the sheriff pulled him to a stop. She inclined her head to his sister and Klint. "Go home, Deborah. Mr. Caper, you need to return to the bank."

Deborah was stricken. "Please. Let me go with you."

His sister's distress constricted his heart, and to distract himself, he looked around at the curious faces watching from a distance. He hadn't counted on this many men being in town. It'd be easy for the sheriff to get up a posse, if he even managed to escape.

Sheriff Vic still contemplated his sister, a thoughtful look upon her face, and then she gave a nod. "Chance might show up at home... You'd better go to Abby's."

Deborah had that look that Fritz knew only too well—fierce stubbornness, like when a snapping turtle got hold of you and wouldn't let go until it thundered. The sheriff must have recognized it, too, for she pulled Deborah aside to speak quietly to her.

Fritz took the opportunity to motion with his cuffed hands to Klint who moved closer. "Who is Chance?" he whispered.

Klint gave a short laugh. "You know him. Chance Hale."

Heat crept up his neck. He knew him all too well. His breathing deepened, and he frowned. “What is he doing in Brokken?”

Before Klint could answer, the sheriff turned back. “Get going. Fritz. Deborah’s coming with us. Mr. Caper, please return to the bank.”

“You sure you don’t need help with this ruffian here?” His friend’s eyes sparkled with amusement.

Deborah shot Klint a glare, and Klint winked. “Your brother and I go way back, Miss Brokken. He’s a fine man I’d trust with my life.”

The muscles in her shoulders relaxed visibly. “I know he is. This is a mistake, and we’ll clear it up soon.”

Her voice was loud enough to carry into the dusty street, and the chatter quieted. Klint’s eyes glazed and then he blinked as if a memory had come and gone, as it had to Fritz. Klint removed his coat and draped it over Fritz’s shoulders. The simple gesture produced a lump in Fritz’s throat, and he swallowed.

Even the sheriff seemed affected, although she stepped closer to inspect the pockets without speaking.

Fritz gave Klint a nod. “I did trust you with mine. And thanks for the coat.”

“Get going now,” the sheriff said, giving a gentle touch on Fritz’s shoulder. She glared at Klint.

But neither man moved for a moment. Klint’s eyes became serious. “Anything you need, let me know.”

Only then did Klint turn to obey the sheriff. She wasted no time but hustled Fritz along until they reached the jail. Once inside, she motioned him toward the back and uncuffed him before opening the cell door. Fritz hated the thought of being locked up again, but he stepped forward into the cell. The door closed behind him with a solid click. A narrow window, set high, let in a thin stream of light. He paced around the small cell and willed himself to release the tension in his muscles.

Deborah’s hands gripped the bars. “Please, Fritz. Tell us what happened.” Tears stood in her eyes.

Lying to the sheriff was one thing. Lying to his sister was another. He bit his lip, and the sheriff pulled up two stools and positioned them outside his cell. “Sit, Deborah. We’ll both sit here and see if he can explain this situation to our satisfaction.”

And Deborah took a seat and gave him an encouraging smile that did little to ease the queasiness he felt.

LYDIA PEEKED OUT THE window, wringing her hands. As soon as Mr. Caper returned to the bank, Lydia locked the door and pulled the shade down.

He raised a brow, his blue eyes sparkling, and moved toward her. “Does this mean what I think it does?”

She backed away and gave a sigh of exasperation. His flirtation was a burden she bore with good humor, most of the time. His blue eyes made it difficult to stay mad for long. Today was different. “I wanted to ask you about Fritz ... Mr. Brokken.”

Mr. Caper raised his eyebrows. “Oh?”

He didn’t make it easier for her. Instead, he moved around the counter and opened the ledger without speaking.

Hating herself, she pushed the words out. “Did he ask about me?”

Mr. Caper’s eyes widened, and he tilted his head toward her, frown lines appearing. “No, Miss Lydia. Should he have?”

Warmth crept into her cheeks. “Of course not. I thought he may have wondered what I was doing here at the bank.”

Mr. Caper had not lived here when Fritz had been sweet on her. She’d forgotten for a moment.

He grinned teasingly, and his eyes twinkled, but his words were softer, as if he noted her distress. “I didn’t get much of a chance to talk to him, not with the sheriff watching us like a hawk.”

“Of course.” Warmth crept up her neck. She’d made a fool of herself over Fritz Brokken. When would she learn?

She went to pull up the shade and unlock the door. She stamped down her embarrassment. “May I take my lunchbreak?”

Mr. Caper studied her, his gaze serious for a change. “Yes, you can. Bring me back something, but Lydia ...”

She’d snatched her coat from the wooden coat tree next to the front door and already had her hand on the brass door handle. She twisted her head to him. “Yes, sir?”

A sternness settled on his features, a look she’d never seen before. “No gossiping. Understand?”

She bristled, but something in his look warned her not to show her irritation. She simply nodded before she slipped out the door without taking time to fasten her coat.

She headed toward Molly’s café and was stopped several times

by curious friends and neighbors. She gave each one the same answer—a shrug. Mr. Caper had no need to tell her not to gossip—as if she'd gossip about Fritz, no matter how hurt and angry she'd been when he'd left without a word.

She didn't want to believe he'd stolen the town's money, but what other explanation was there? Cold air nipped at her nose, and she pulled her coat closer around her and buttoned it with numb fingers. She was glad to feel the warmth of the restaurant when she opened the door.

Molly met her with a smile. "You're late for lunch today."

No one else was in the restaurant. Lydia moved to the potbellied stove to warm her hands. "I'm sure you've heard Fritz has returned," she said quietly, her eyes downcast.

Molly came to stand beside her. "What of Curt and Karl?"

"It seems Fritz was under the impression his brothers were here in town." Lydia took a seat near the stove, and Molly sat down across from her. Was that considered gossip? Fritz had spoken in front of several people, after all.

Molly's forehead creased, and she reached across the table to take Lydia's hand in hers. "Are you feeling all right, honey?"

Lydia blinked back tears and attempted a smile. "Of course. It's been a long time, and it was a shock to see him. That's all."

Molly patted her hand. "Thomas set back a couple of plates for you and Mr. Caper. Are you going to eat here?"

Lydia didn't have much of an appetite, but she nodded. "I will, but Mr. Caper won't be in today. He told me to bring a plate for him."

"I'll go get your food." She gave Lydia's hand another pat before she left her.

Lydia sat listless and waited for her food. Seeing Fritz brought back a flood of memories. And he'd barely given her a glance when he'd caught sight of her. Her heart still ached for him, but obviously, he'd never given her a second thought.

Lydia noticed she still wore her coat. She stood to remove it and then smoothed down a crease in her dress. Life was too short to spend pining over one man. She smiled when Molly returned with her plate. The food was delicious, and she determined she'd enjoy every bite.

Chapter Twenty-four

Fritz threw his hat on the cot and put a hand on the solid wood wall. He needed a moment to compose himself and to remove the image of Lydia Walsh from his mind. She'd been even lovelier than he remembered.

Sheriff Vic gave a short cough. "Start talking, or I'll send for the circuit judge."

Fritz struggled to erase Lydia from his mind as he took a seat on the cot and rested his elbows on his knees. "As I've already said, Curt sent me to New York, to apprentice under a friend of his."

The sheriff gave a snort. "I suppose the people of New York welcomed a Confederate soldier?"

Fritz shook his head. "Of course not. That's why all the secrecy. I went incognito, tried my best to blend in with all those Yankees."

Deborah had remained quiet, although her gaze remained on him. She now spoke. "Why didn't you tell me good-bye?"

"I did bid you good-bye, that day at the bank. Curt did not want to disclose where I was going and was afraid your countenance would unveil our secret before we executed our plan. Our brother thought we needed to learn and invest first, to discover if we could in actuality profit from our investments before we explained to people what we were doing. We hoped others would join in the endeavor." He made an effort to smooth the planes of his face. Guilt burdened him every day he'd been gone, not only because he left his sister but for leaving Lydia also, for allowing her to think he no longer cared. He tightened the muscles of his jaw and looked away.

A stool scraped across the floor, drawing his attention. Deborah was at the bars again. "I don't understand why you took the town's money. It was foolish."

"More than foolish," Sheriff Vic said.

Fritz ran his fingers through his hair. "I will attempt to explain again. Curt talked to Karl and me. We decided something must be done, in order to return prosperity to the town founded by our father. He'd heard the Stock Market was doing well after the War and thought we should invest..."

"With the town's money." Sheriff Vic's voice cracked through

the air like a whip.

"I know nothing of the town's money. We had a little saved up, not much, but he told me not to invest right away, not until I learned more. His friend I apprenticed under..."

"The friend's name?" The sheriff narrowed her eyes and motioned Deborah back to her seat.

"Mr. Daniel Fitzgerald." He had tilted his chin a notch higher and spoken firmly. The name was a fake one, but he would be on his way before she received information from New York. He flashed a smile at Deborah and tried to convey a message to her. "I'm certain you heard Curt speak of him?"

Deborah shook her head slowly, until she caught his eye. "Oh. Now that I think about it, I do remember the name, vaguely."

Good girl. "I've been working with Mr. Fitzgerald for the past eight months or so. I returned home to consult with Curt and Karl, to discuss with them what they wished to do next. A very simple story, Sheriff. I am sure you understand we would never do anything to harm the town."

The sheriff was eyeing him. "You look downright puny. They don't have food in New York?"

Fritz laughed. "Yankee cooking will do this to you. I can't wait to sit down to a good homecooked meal."

The sheriff still frowned at him. "Why haven't you written? No letters have been received."

"Curt's instructions. He feared those New Yorkers would find out who I really was. As you so wisely pointed out, the people at the New York Stock Market would not take kindly to the likes of me." It was a flimsy lie but would have to do.

The sheriff fell silent for a moment. Fritz took the time to give Deborah a reassuring wink. She returned a weak smile before straightening her back. She searched his eyes again and gave a nod, as if arriving at a decision.

The sheriff stood. "And you say you had no idea Curt and Karl robbed the bank?"

Fritz stood also and moved closer to the bars and to the sheriff. "I know my brothers. I cannot believe they robbed the bank. There must be another explanation. Please release me, and I will discover the truth."

The sheriff looked down and scuffed the toe of her boot on the rough cobbled floor. "I can think of no other explanation. And since

you disappeared at the same time, I cannot rule you out as an accomplice. I will need to corroborate your story."

Deborah rose and stood beside the sheriff, taking her arm. "It's obvious Fritz does not know why Curt and Karl robbed the bank. Please let him go, Vic. At least let him stay with us."

"With us? You and the sheriff?" Fritz asked, momentarily confused.

"I moved into the house in town, and the sheriff has moved in with me, to oversee my courting." A blush rose to his sister's cheeks. "I have a fiancé."

Fritz couldn't help but smile when Deborah cheeks turned redder. "And who is this young man?"

"You don't know him. His name is Chance Hale."

He struggled to keep his features from revealing his feelings. He had to get out and get out now if Curt and Karl had a chance to survive. "I've heard of him," he managed to say with a minimal gritting of his teeth.

With a look of defeat, the sheriff unlocked the cell door and swung it open. "Come on. I reckon Deb's right. I can watch you at the house."

He snatched his hat from the cot and settled it on his head. He took Deborah by the elbow and walked her out ahead of the sheriff. While Sheriff Vic locked up, he whispered into his sister's ear. "Get Klint to come by the house as soon as possible."

Deborah only had time for a short nod before the sheriff joined them on the sidewalk. "Let's get going."

With a quick glance at Fritz, Deborah placed a hand on the sheriff's arm. "I must stop by the bank first.

"Don't tarry. I need your presence at home," the sheriff said to her.

Deborah nodded and gave her brother a hug before she walked away with determination in her step.

"Don't make me regret this, Fritz," the sheriff growled.

That was exactly what he was going to do.

Chapter Twenty-five

Lydia gave a gasp when Deborah came in the bank. She'd not expected to see her again so soon. Lydia touched her hair, made sure it was in place, and ran a tongue over her dry lips. She anticipated the arrival of Fritz, but Deborah was alone. Of course. Sheriff Vic would not release him so quickly, not until she'd made inquiries.

Deborah smiled, but her glance went beyond Lydia. "Is Mr. Caper in?"

Lydia nodded. "He's in the back. Do you want me to tell him you're here?"

"No. I'll go back." Her eyes darted around the room before settling on Lydia again. "We are alone, are we not?"

Lydia frowned, worried. "Of course."

Deborah must have seen her apprehension. She gave a short laugh. "Seeing Fritz has me in a tizzy." She gave a soft smile. "Vic is letting him go home. I would extend an invitation ..."

Lydia could not bear to hear Fritz did not desire her presence. "I understand," she said, quickly.

Deborah gave her another smile, of pity, Lydia was sure, before going to the back room. Lydia knew she shouldn't do it but could not resist the urge. After Deborah shut the door, Lydia crept to it, held her breath, and pressed her ear against the wood panel.

"That's all he said." Deborah's voice was faint, but Lydia's hearing was excellent.

"Thank you, Miss Brokken. May I take the afternoon off?" As usual, Mr. Caper's voice held a touch of amusement.

"Fritz said as soon as possible. Please hurry." The doorknob was turning, and Lydia scurried to the front.

She made it behind the counter before Deborah fully emerged and spoke to her. "Mr. Caper has some business to attend to. I trust you can handle the customers this afternoon?"

"Certainly." Lydia kept her head bent over the ledger, as if balancing accounts. She didn't glance up until Deborah left.

Mr. Caper came out only moments later. For once, his gaze did not linger on her as if he had donned blinders.

“I’m not sure when I’ll be returning, Miss Walsh. You will be able to close tonight if I am unable to return?”

Although Deborah had given her a set of keys two months ago, this was the first time she had been entrusted with closing the bank. “Yes, sir. I can take care of everything.”

His eyes fully focused on her, his face serious. “I believe you can. Thank you for all you do. If I have failed to express my appreciation in the past, please forgive me.”

Lydia was taken aback. It was as if he were telling her good-bye. As far as she could determine, Deborah had only asked Mr. Caper to come by her house to see Fritz. Inexplicably, a tear came to her eye, and when she smiled, her bottom lip quivered. Modestly, she said, “I simply try to do my best, Mr. Caper.”

He inclined his head toward her. “And that’s more than most.”

He gave her a genuine smile that crinkled his eyes before he squared his shoulders and marched out.

She swallowed hard and blinked away the tears. She didn’t have a clue what was happening, but she understood what her job entailed. She picked up the pen, her hand poised above the inkwell, said a quick prayer, and bent her head to her work.



FRITZ GLANCED AROUND the house he had once called home with his two brothers. The changes in only eight months amazed him. The house was cleaner than he’d ever seen it. When he’d lived there with his brothers, Mrs. Glinty had been hired to clean twice a week. Her arthritic limbs had kept her from keeping the house in pristine condition. Now, all the surfaces gleamed, and the house smelled faintly of pine.

He got a fire started in the fireplace while the sheriff put on a pot of coffee. When she emerged from the kitchen, she’d donned an apron, at odds with her outfit of men’s britches, white blouse, and vest. The edge of the star peeked from the edge of the apron. She’d not removed her gun, and the outline of the holster was clearly visible.

“I hope you like your coffee strong,” she said.

“The stronger, the better,” he replied. Being in the house flooded him with memories. More than likely, he would never return, and he walked around the room to peer at the paintings of his family his father had commissioned.

He remembered the maypop wars, and the time the young brothers had taken turns riding the boar, until their father had admonished them. They'd chewed sour Indian cane and stripped honeysuckle flowers from the vine to catch drops of sweet nectar. Once, he and Karl had pulled down a young pine tree for Curt to climb on. When Fritz and Karl had let go, the pine tree flipped wildly before snapping in two, sending Curt flailing through the air. They'd been at the shooting house, by the lake, and luckily, Curt landed near the bank that had been muddied and softened from the hooves of the cattle. Once they'd been assured their brother survived, all three had fallen in a heap, rolling in the mud, and topped it off with a swim in the lake.

He sighed heavily, turned away, and approached the fireplace.

The sheriff observed him, her eyes solemn. "I'll scrounge up some food. How would eggs and sausage suit you?"

"Fine." He took a seat next to the fireplace, leaned forward with his elbows on his knees, and linked his fingers.

The sheriff still studied him, as if he was an insect on the end of a pin. "I've got to tell you, Fritz, that you seem despondent, and that makes me nervous."

He searched for a reason to explain his melancholy. He cast her a sideways glance. "It was a shock to learn my brothers robbed the bank, although I do not believe for a moment they did so."

She nodded, her eyes thoughtful. "It seems more than that is bothering you."

"You have me under arrest. And if that's not enough reason for you, Deborah is engaged to Chance Hale." He couldn't help his lip curled when he said the name. He straightened in the chair and smoothed the planes of his face.

Sheriff Vic placed her hands on her hips, and her stance became rigid. "You know him?"

He shrugged. "Who doesn't know the name?"

"Let me tell you one thing," she pointed a finger and took a step toward him. "That War is over. We've worked hard the last few months to get this town united, to get people working together again. If you stay here, you'll forget what side you fought on during the War. Do you understand?" She inched so close that if she'd wagged her finger a bit more, she would have hit his chest.

"I understand," he lied. There was no need getting involved in an argument that might get in the way of his mission. And it was

not simply the fact Mr. Hale fought in the Union army. He had been a Sharpshooter. Fritz had been a fair shot himself and volunteered as a sharpshooter for the Confederacy. Aiming at unsuspecting men filled him with revulsion. And yet, obviously, Chance Hale had not been bothered by it. Mr. Hale continued throughout the War, killing, perhaps, hundreds of men, with not a prick of his conscience. Good men. Men whom Fritz had called friends.

But there was more to his dislike of Chance than that, if he dared admit it to himself.

Chance had gone head-to-head with him, on Fritz's very first outing, outshooting him and scattering his men. Three good soldiers had died by Mr. Hale's hand that day, and four more wounded. Only one of Fritz's shots had found its target. No, it had not been Mr. Hale, but another of the Unionists who had derided Fritz's shooting, as if it had been a competition instead of war.

Fritz had requested a transfer soon after that.

While Fritz's thoughts were wandering, the sheriff still talked. "Your sister loves that man, and Chance has shown only the highest respect to her, to me, to others in this town. If you have a problem with him, you have a problem with me."

He nodded and lifted his hands as if defeated. But he was not through with Chance Hale. When he had an opportunity, he would deal with him. For now, he could not spare the time.

Sheriff Vic seemed satisfied with his reaction and went into the kitchen. He stretched his legs out. For a moment, he imagined a few days of rest. No, he could not afford to tarry even a day. With time short, he got up and strode to his room, to wash and change. He didn't know when he'd have another opportunity.

After he washed up and packed a bag, he heard Deborah come in the backdoor and speak to the sheriff. He met her in the foyer where she hung up her bonnet and coat.

"Is Klint on his way?" he asked quietly.

She nodded. After a quick glance over her shoulder, toward the kitchen, she moved closer. "Tell me what's going on. Where have you really been?"

He shrugged. "You heard what I told the sheriff."

"I heard." That stubborn Brokken look came on her face, and her eyes locked with his.

"I can't tell you more—not now, not here." He pressed his lips together and shook his head.

A knock came at the front door, and Deborah, after casting him a look, went to answer it and returned with Klint, who looked his normal cheerful self.

"Who in blazes is that?" the sheriff yelled from the kitchen.

"It's Klint. He came to tell me about a problem at the bank," Deborah yelled back.

Fritz blinked at her, amazed how easily she lied to the sheriff. He didn't greet Klint but took his arm and pulled him to the hallway that led to the bedrooms.

Deborah followed, and Fritz pointed to the sitting room. "Wait in there and watch for the sheriff."

Deborah shook her head. "I want to know what's going on."

Fritz didn't have time to argue. Time was growing shorter. He motioned Klint farther down the hallway, toward the window at the end. Deborah stuck to them like a tick.

Turning his back on his sister, Fritz dropped his voice. "Klint, can you get ready tonight? I want to head out by sunrise. We'll leave from the livery."

Klint nodded and didn't ask any questions. The amusement had left his eyes, replaced with a steely determination.

"What?" Deborah hissed. "You're leaving? You just got here."

Fritz sighed heavily. For a moment, he gazed out the window, at the bare apple tree, before he faced his sister. "I'm going back for Curt and Karl."

She nodded, as if she'd known. "Where are they? And why do you need Klint?"

He ignored her first question. "He has special skills I can use."

When Fritz started back to the sitting room, Klint caught his arm. "Wait. I know someone with even better skills."

Fritz frowned at him. There weren't many sharpshooters better than Klint Caper. "Who?"

Klint stretched to his full height, and his shoulders became rigid, as if expecting an onslaught. His eyes met Fritz's. "Chance. Chance Hale."

Fritz spit one word out. "No."

Deborah did likewise at the exact same moment. Anger flashed in her eyes, aimed at Klint. He should have wilted under her glare.

Klint ignored her, and Fritz felt Klint's hand tighten on his arm. He lowered his voice. "You won't regret it if he rides with us."

Deborah clutched at Fritz's other arm. Fritz patted her hand and

pulled away from Klint's grasp. "My no is final."

Deborah's eyes filled with relief, and she nodded her agreement. They headed back to the sitting room just as Sheriff Vic called out, "Supper's ready. Y'all wash up."

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LYDIA KNEW CHANCE WOULD be visiting Deborah, as he did every night and planned to intercept him. To tell the truth, Mr. Caper's behavior had her worried. He had not returned, and her curiosity had gotten the best of her. After locking up the bank, she walked toward the Brokken Road. The air was cool, and she tightened her shawl around her shoulders. Darkness gathered when she finally spotted him.

A full moon illuminated his figure. He tipped his hat. "Good evening, Miss Lydia."

"Mr. Hale." She dipped her head in his direction and fell in step by him. "I suppose you're going to see Deborah?"

He nodded and kept walking. Her shoes pinched her feet as she struggled to keep pace with him.

"Did you hear one of Deborah's brothers has returned?" She kept her voice light as if she only exchanged a bit of gossip.

He came to a stop and turned to fully face her. "Yes, I've heard. Colonel Fritz Brokken, accused of robbing Brokken Bank rode into town this morning. Little Calvin came to the ranch this morning to tell Mr. Isaac and me. Calvin's a regular Pony Express."

Lydia laughed. "Calvin seems to enjoy delivering news or spreading rumors. Take your pick."

Mr. Hale removed his hat, ran his fingers through his hair, and stared into the distance. "Have you heard anything further?"

"Fritz has been released from jail and is at the Brokken house. I thought you might want to know." She bit her lip and waited for his response.

He gave a short nod, and she reached out a hand to stop him when he started to move away. He paused and gave her a questioning look.

"Do you mind if I tag along?" She was glad the partial darkness hid her cheeks that she knew blazed red.

The quizzical expression remained, but he nodded. "I would be delighted with your company."

They were less than half a block from the Brokken house, and

she grasped his arm, giddiness overcoming her. Her laughter bubbled forth, and they strolled to the house without speaking. Her heart beat wildly in her chest. She had to remind herself she only wanted to find out what was happening and had no interest in seeing Fritz. He was lost to her, no matter what happened.

Almost as soon as Chance knocked, Deborah opened the door. A smile spread across her face. “Chance, you must come in and meet my brother.”

She pulled him through the doorway before her gaze landed on Lydia. Lydia stepped forward into the light spilling from the house.

“I happened to run into Mr. Hale, and he insisted I accompany him.” She cast a sideways glance at Mr. Hale, and he nodded, as if Lydia’s lie was true.

“Of course,” Deborah cried. “Fritz will be happy you came by.”

Mr. Hale stepped back to let Lydia pass. Deborah took Lydia’s arm, and Chance followed. Deborah led her into the dark sitting room. “Fritz! We have company.”

Fritz had been standing by the fireplace, his head down. He held the poker in his hand and thrust it at the logs. Oil lamps had been lit, and light skittered around the room.

Lydia could not help her heart leaped to her throat when he looked up and saw her. His face had been unmasked, and a smile lit his eyes, as if he was genuinely happy to see her. Almost as quickly as it appeared, it faded away, as if a shade lowered. His face regained impassivity, although the look had done its job. A warmth settled within her, and she forced herself to move out of his line of sight. Fritz’s gaze traveled to Mr. Hale, but he did not speak or acknowledge him in any way.

Deborah’s eyes were alight as she pulled her fiancé closer to her brother. “Fritz, this is Chance Hale.”

Mr. Hale had removed his hat when he entered the house and still held it in his hand. He gave a wary nod to Fritz.

Lydia felt the chill between the two men as they sized each other up. Although Mr. Hale was slightly taller than Fritz’s six-foot height, he had a slenderer build. Fritz’s shoulders were broader, and his overall build more muscular.

Deborah took her brother’s hand and gave a small laugh. “I told you I was engaged! You didn’t believe me?”

After a long moment, Fritz moved the poker to his left hand and extended his right. “Nice to meet you.”

“Likewise,” Mr. Hale said. The two men barely touched hands.

Deborah moved closer to Mr. Hale, took his arm, and tilted her chin. “I know he’s a Yankee, but the War is over. We’re one nation now.”

Neither man spoke nor smiled. Fritz went back to jabbing at the logs. Sparks scattered, and a flame burst forth briefly. Fritz added another log and more kindling and ignored the pleading in his sister’s voice.

Lydia took a step back, regretting her decision to trail along after Mr. Hale. The sadness mingled with anger on Fritz’s face sent pains shooting through her heart. She was here now and would make the most of it.

Chapter Twenty-six

The fire danced in the fireplace, although the place where Lydia stood remained in the shadows. The room was wide and long, wallpapered in a navy print that only served to darken the room. The vignette around the fireplace drew her closer, with its warmth of tans and reds.

Without a word, Fritz flopped down on a leather chair, surprising Lydia with his behavior. He'd normally ask his guests to sit before taking a seat. He leaned back in the chair, the wingbacks hiding his face, and stretched his legs out on the ottoman.

Deborah motioned to Lydia, and Lydia took a chair away from Fritz, although one where she could see his face if she leaned forward ever so slightly.

Fingers of light danced along the walls and emphasized the silence. Lydia studied Fritz, unobserved. His cheeks were sunken, and his skin weathered, as if he'd been a long time in a cold wind. On the rare occasions he raised his head, his eyes were glazed—sad if Lydia had to name their expression. She longed to comfort him in some way.

Mr. Hale had taken a seat next to Deborah on the settee, his hat still in his hand. He kept his eyes on his hat as he twirled it around and around.

Deborah chatted about the bank, about their supper, about how the town had changed. Nothing caught either man's attention.

Lydia felt horrible. She should be helping Deborah carry the conversation, not sitting there lost in her own thoughts. She cleared her throat. "Have you told Fritz about his surprise?"

Fritz raised his head slowly, his eyes still dull. "What surprise?"

Deborah shot Lydia a smile before turning back to her brother. "I haven't had a chance. Do you remember Windy's colt? Rebecca Walsh has been working with him."

"Yes?" He straightened in his seat and turned to fully face his sister.

Lydia spoke before Deborah could, hoping to garner his interest. "Lucky has come along fine." Her cheeks heated when she remembered how the horse had thrown her. It'd been her fault, of

course, taking the horse out before he was fully trained.

"Lucky? I'd forgotten we'd named him that." Fritz gave Lydia a brief glance, but a sparkle of interest lingered.

"We'll go see him tomorrow—" Deborah broke off, and her gaze fell to her hands.

Fritz frowned at her and then visibly forced a smile. "Yes, we will. Tomorrow."

Silence fell. Deborah kept her face averted from Lydia, but she could have sworn she saw her wipe away a tear.

"Where's Sheriff Vic?" Lydia asked.

Deborah cleared her throat, but her voice was hoarse when she spoke. "She went down to the jail, to make sure it was securely locked."

Lydia stood, and the two men got slowly to their feet. "I must be on my way. The family will be worried about me."

Fritz moved restlessly. "And I'm sure Mr. Hale needs to get going, too."

"Fritz! Chance is my company." Deborah shot Fritz a look and then took Lydia's arm. "I'll walk you out."

"Goodnight, Miss Walsh," Fritz said, without looking in her direction.

"Goodnight." Her voice was barely a whisper, all she could manage. Anguish had closed her throat.

"Chance, keep my brother company. I'll be right back." Deborah took Lydia's arm, and they went into the hallway to retrieve her coat and bonnet.

Lydia leaned close to Deborah. "What's going on?"

Deborah looked startled. "What do you mean?"

Lydia motioned toward the sitting room. "All of that in there. They barely spoke to each other."

"Oh, you know men. They're still fighting the War."

Lydia laid the back of her hand on Deborah's cheek for a moment. "There's more. You're upset about something."

Deborah caught Lydia's hand and pulled it down. "Fritz was arrested today. That was humiliating."

"But he explained everything to the sheriff's satisfaction?" Lydia busied herself with donning her coat and gloves.

Deborah shrugged, her eyes darkening. "I don't know. Vic is going to do some investigating tomorrow."

The men's loud voices emerged from the sitting room, and

Deborah hurried to the door. Lydia came to a stop behind her. Fritz and Chance were face to face. No, nose to nose.

"Stay away from my house," Fritz growled.

"Your house? Your sister lives here, and I abide by her wishes, not yours."

Fritz laid his flat palms against Mr. Hale's chest and pushed. "You'll do what I say."

Mr. Hale staggered back and moved forward almost in one movement. Deborah cried out, but it was too late. Chance landed a solid blow on Fritz's jaw. Fritz stumbled and bent over although he recovered quickly. He lowered his right shoulder and plowed into Mr. Hale. They fell to the floor.

The backdoor opened although no one paid any heed. The men rolled back and forth, slamming each other with their fists. Deborah screamed for them to stop. Lydia was too stunned to do more than to ineffectively gesture at them.

Sheriff Vic came from the kitchen. "What in blazes is going on? Stop it now."

The men were beyond reason. The sheriff grabbed Mr. Hale's shirt and pulled him back. He swung wildly until Deborah stepped between him and her brother. Then his shoulders slumped forward, and he placed his hands on the floor, panting. Deborah knelt beside him.

Fritz tried to scramble to Mr. Hale. The sheriff grabbed his arm, twisted it around his back and sat down on him.

"I should've kept you in the cuffs," she said calmly.

Fritz struggled for a moment and then stilled. The sheriff nodded toward Mr. Hale. "You ladies go with Chance. He needs to get home before I let Fritz up."

"Why don't you arrest him?" Fritz grumbled. "He tried to kill me. In my own home."

Mr. Hale swiped the back of his arm across his mouth, trailing a streak of blood. He sent a look to Fritz that should have had Deborah's brother keeling over.

The sheriff motioned again with her head, and Deborah and Lydia, one on each side, led Chance down the hall, pausing only long enough for him to grab his coat, and then outside.

Once on the porch, Mr. Hale raked back his hair. "I left my hat."

"Promise me you'll stay here, and I'll go get it," Deborah said. "Keep him here, Lydia."

Lydia nodded. Chance rubbed his chin, and worked his jaw, groaning. Deborah ran in the house and returned almost immediately with the hat.

Deborah placed a hand on his arm and peered into his face. Anger danced in her eyes. “Are you all right?”

Mr. Hale pulled away. “Don’t make a fuss,” he muttered.

Deborah glanced from Chance to Lydia. “I’m sorry. Fritz is under a lot of stress.”

Lydia wasn’t sure to whom she apologized—to her or to Chance. She nodded. “I understand, Deborah. It must have been a shock to come back to find his brothers had robbed the bank.”

Mr. Hale scoffed.

Lydia glanced at him and raised a brow. “What? You don’t think he’s upset over his brothers robbing the bank?”

“Not if he was in on it himself. And anyone can see he was.” Mr. Hale glanced at Deborah and ducked his head, as if he’d known he’d said too much.

Deborah took a step back and pointed a finger at him. “Don’t ever say that again. This does not concern you, Chance. You haven’t married into this family yet, so I suggest you do not get in the middle of it.”

He raised his head, and his lips twisted, eliciting another groan, and he touched his lip before he spoke. “Middle of what?”

Lydia agreed something was going on with Fritz. And if he’d been living in New York for months, why did he look so weather-beaten?

Deborah’s lips compressed in a straight line, and she raised her arms to shoo both away. “My meaning is clear. This is a family problem, and it is in your best interest to stay out of it. Now, please leave. It’s freezing out here.”

Mr. Hale settled his hat on his head. “I’ll see you tomorrow? Unless that’s getting in the middle of something?”

“Please go,” Deborah said. She turned on her heel and disappeared into the house without bidding either of them goodnight.

Lydia took Mr. Hale’s arm and pulled him forward, to get him going. He walked beside her without protest until they came to the end of the road. He came to a stop and held up a hand. She released him, and he leaned forward, with his hands on his knees, to spit.

When he did so, a dark shadow emerged from under a clump of

trees, and Lydia stifled a cry. Her heart beat furiously in her chest until she recognized Mr. Caper.

The moon shone bright enough that she could see him clearly. He tipped his hat at her, but his eyes were on Mr. Hale. “What’s going on?”

Mr. Hale didn’t answer, still bent at his waist.

Lydia considered how much to reveal to Mr. Caper. “Fritz and Mr. Hale had a disagreement,” she mumbled.

Even in the dim light, the sparkle in his eyes was evident. He gave her a wink. “I suppose that is one way of expressing it.”

Mr. Hale straightened and wiped his mouth again, probably wiping away more blood. The moonlight was not bright enough for her to tell.

Mr. Caper studied him and then grinned at Chance. “I hope you did not damage Fritz more than the damage inflicted upon you.”

Even by the thin light of the moon, the anger flashing in Chance’s eyes was clearly seen.

“I must be getting home.” Lydia gave a wave and walked away. She did not want to find herself in the middle of another fight, even as a bystander.

Mr. Hale flicked a glance in her direction but didn’t speak. When he turned to Mr. Caper instead, she made a quick decision. She ducked behind a nearby bush and peered through its branches. Her curiosity had gotten the best of her.

“What if I did?” Mr. Hale glared at Mr. Caper as if he planned to punch him as he had Fritz.

Lydia slipped farther into the shadows and hoped they’d continue talking. Her need to know what was going on with Fritz overcame the anxious beating of her heart. Maybe Mr. Caper knew something, and he would share that knowledge with Mr. Hale.

Mr. Caper rubbed his chin slowly and took his time answering. “Well, if Fritz is hurt badly, that would be a shame. It might interfere with our plans.”

“What plans?” Mr. Hale frowned and touched his jaw, grimacing as he did so.

Mr. Caper glanced around. “Where has the lovely Miss Lydia disappeared to?”

Mr. Hale shrugged. “She left, said she had to get home.”

Mr. Caper glancing around. Lydia stooped lower very quietly and held her breath. After a moment, Mr. Caper seemed satisfied.

He stepped closer to Mr. Hale. “I spoke to Fritz briefly. He needs our help.”

“Our?”

“Yes, *our*. I’m not doing this without you.”

“Doing what?” Mr. Hale placed his hands on his knees again and spit.

Lydia twisted her fingers. What if Fritz had badly hurt Chance? Relief flooded her when he straightened again and turned toward Mr. Caper.

Mr. Caper seemed unaware or uncaring of Mr. Hale’s pain. He shrugged his shoulders. “I’m not rightly sure what we will be doing, although it appears Deborah’s other two brothers are in trouble.”

Mr. Hale did not speak for a moment. When he did, his voice held weariness. “Where?”

“I don’t know.”

Mr. Hale straightened to his full height. “So, I’m supposed to go with you and Fritz”—he said the name as if he spit out poison —“without knowing where or why?” He shook his head and looked away.

“We’re talking about Deborah’s brothers. They need your help.”

Mr. Hale worked his jaw and softly touched the left side of his face. He then jerked a thumb in the direction of the Brokken house. “Fritz didn’t seem to want my help back there.”

Mr. Caper sidled closer to Mr. Hale. “He doesn’t know you like I do. He needs your skill—”

Mr. Hale held up a hand. “I haven’t touched a rifle in two years, if that’s what you’re getting at. I ain’t planning on doing it now.”

“Not even to save Deborah’s brothers?”

“Save them for what purpose? If they return here, they’re going to trial for robbing the bank.” His face hardened. “With any luck, Fritz will join them when they are incarcerated.”

“Listen. I don’t know Fritz’s plan. Maybe after he rescues his brothers, they’ll keep riding, maybe out to California.”

“If they’re anything like Fritz, they are perfectly capable of taking care of themselves. Let Fritz go and join them. Good riddance if the other two share his disdain of me.”

“You’re upset. Think this over. What if Deborah finds out you didn’t lift a finger to help her brothers?”

“How will she know? We let Fritz ride out to save his brothers. If you want to go, you are free to join him. I stay put here, and

she'll never know."

"She already knows. She was there when Fritz told me."

Mr. Hale sighed heavily. "Listen, Klint. I had a little chat with Fritz tonight. As you can see, it did not proceed amiably. If you want to help him, help him. Leave me out of it."

Mr. Caper clicked his tongue. "I had hopes we were friends. Would you send your friend to death and go on with your life here? Marry Miss Brokken and live happily ever after?"

Mr. Hale glared at him again and then sighed heavily. "I don't want to stand here all night arguing with you."

"Quit arguing and agree." Mr. Caper slid another step closer to Mr. Hale and lowered his voice. "You know it's the right thing to do."

"No, I do not, although I suppose you'll keep pestering me until I agree."

"So, you agree?"

Mr. Hale held up a hand. "I agree to find out more. If it's not to my liking, I will walk away. Understand?"

Mr. Caper nodded. "Yes. Fine. Whatever you want to do."

"When do we leave?" An even greater weariness colored his words.

"Before sunrise."

"Before sunrise? You mean in a few hours?" Mr. Hale shook his head vehemently. "No. Deborah was upset with me. I will not leave without speaking to her."

Mr. Caper pointed down the street. "Go now. Just don't speak of our plans."

"You said she knew."

"Yes, but the sheriff is in the house. She might overhear. Knock on the door, tell Deborah you're sorry, and then you can ride out with us with a clear conscience."

Mr. Hale scuffed a toe of his boot. "I can't. Sheriff Vic told me to go home. She'd probably arrest me if I go back."

Lydia, her heart beating wildly, left her hiding place in the bushes. "Mr. Hale, there's no need to worry. I'll get Deborah in the morning. I'm certain she will want to tell you goodbye. To leave, without a word, is not right, no matter the reason." *And was what Fritz had done, when he had gone away months ago, and what he planned to do again.* Her heart constricted with the knowledge of his indifference to her.

Mr. Caper took two strides, grabbed her arm, and gave a slight shake. “You little eavesdropper. I thought you went home.”

“I suggest y’all keep a closer eye out while you’re on your little adventure.” She pulled out of his grasp and held up a hand. “I’m not telling anyone about your conversation. I’m Deborah’s friend, and I would never do anything to hurt her.”

And that was true. But to be truthful, she hoped that she’d see Fritz one last time. Even if he did manage to return, he would be jailed, and nothing could prevent that.

Her lip quivered. At least she’d see Fritz before he disappeared from her life forever.

Chapter Twenty-seven

Lydia twisted her hands together to keep them from shaking.

Mr. Caper looked up at the stars and was silent for a moment before he shook his head. “You can’t get Deborah involved in this, more than she already is. We cannot risk you two traipsing around when we leave and draw someone’s attention.”

Lydia shook her head stubbornly. “She must tell Mr. Hale goodbye.”

Mr. Hale shot her a grateful look, and a tightness formed at the corners of his mouth. “I’m not leaving until I see her.”

“The more people involved, the more likely we are to be discovered. Go home, Miss Walsh and forget all you’ve heard.”

Tears stung her eyes. She’d never told anyone but her mother, had even erased it from her own mind, pushing it to the far recesses. Now, she fully brought the memory to the surface and replayed it. Fritz had once spoken to her of marriage, in a joking way, as something in the near future. When Lydia had asked her mother if he might be serious, she had replied that a man was always serious when he spoke of marriage.

If Fritz had not left, how different her life might now be. She would be Mrs. Brokken, and none of this would be happening. He would never have left with his brothers.

She took a deep breath and blew it out softly, bringing her emotions under control. “It does involve me—at least, it involves my family’s business.”

Mr. Caper frowned at her. “Exactly what do you mean?”

“Deborah left a horse in our care, to be trained. My sister and Jake have been working with him for several months now.”

Mr. Hale nodded quickly. “Yes. We have to go by the livery to retrieve the horse.”

Lydia’s heart quickened at the thought her plan might succeed. “And I’ve seen the horses you two ride. We have a couple more that would suit your needs better.”

Mr. Caper frowned at her. “Out of the question. We do not have the money to pay.”

“Who asked you to pay? Consider them a gift.” Lydia smiled,

happy to contribute to Fritz, even in such a small way.

Mr. Caper removed his hat and beat it on his leg. “We’ll get hung for horse thieving.”

Mr. Hale held up a hand. “Hold on. She’s right. We’ll need better mounts to keep up with Fritz. What if we trade our horses, and I’ll give the Walsh’s what little money I’ve managed to save?”

Mr. Caper sighed heavily. “Reckon that might work. And Deborah’s paid me well at the bank. I’ll contribute my share.”

“It’s settled then,” Lydia said with satisfaction. “I’ll get Deborah to meet us at the livery, before sunrise, and I’ll have the three horses saddled and ready.”

Mr. Caper gave a short nod. “Do you think you can handle the horses by yourself? We do not want your sister or your brother-in-law involved.”

“Of course,” Lydia lied. True, she’d been raised with horses, but she’d never taken an interest, especially when she was young, and her father and brother still lived and ran the livery. When they had not returned from the War, Rebecca had taken over, with a little help from their brother, Noah. He’d been sickly as a young boy and had never been a lot of help until Jake Harper arrived and treated him like a man instead of an invalid. And Lydia had never questioned the arrangements.

But if Noah could do it, she could too. She’d watched Jake teaching Noah, at first because she’d been attracted to Jake. As time passed, she realized her attraction to Jake was only to fill the gaping hole left when Fritz had ridden away without a word. Anyway, she’d learned a few things about horses. If Noah could turn into a good horseman, so could she.

Mr. Caper beat his hat against his leg again. “It’s time to get going. We’ve been standing around half the night.”

Lydia’s heart beat wildly. She felt young and free, the world full of possibility—at least she had the possibility of seeing Fritz before he rode away. She reminded herself she was upset Fritz had hit Chance, but hadn’t Chance landed the first blow? As much as she liked Mr. Hale, Fritz had her heart. “I’ll see you gentlemen in a few hours. The horses will be ready.”

They nodded and strode off together, their heads bent low. Instead of continuing home, she turned toward the Brokken house. She had no idea what time it was, but she’d see if Deborah was still awake.

A steadiness filled her limbs. She could do this, no matter who answered the door.

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THE SHERIFF STERNLY told Fritz to go to his room and not show his face until the morrow, unless he wanted to be thrown into jail. His knuckles were raw, and he gingerly washed his hands and examined his face in the mirror. His lip was split, and his skin was yellowing beneath his left eye. He'd have a black eye by morning.

He needed sleep, but restlessness filled him. As soon as he heard Sheriff Vic retire to her room, he slipped from his.

In the sitting room, Deborah was on her feet, pacing. The moment he appeared in the doorway, she came toward him.

"Chance Hale is my fiancé. We will marry, and you will not stop us, no matter what shenanigans you pull," she said, her voice low and flat. The look on her face made him hesitate to enter the room.

She stepped aside. "We need to talk."

"Let it go, Deb." Fritz took a seat and leaned his aching head back on the chair. He could have been getting a few hours of sleep instead of arguing with his sister. It was true he shouldn't have hit that Yankee, not now when he needed time to rest, to plan, to prepare for what lay ahead. His fury had gotten the best of him. He flexed his arm and winced in pain.

"Promise me you will not interfere again." Her eyes flashed and narrowed.

"I don't want to argue," he whispered.

Deborah her eyes wet with tears, waved a hand. "Yes. I know you are leaving in a few hours, but you are coming back?"

He gave her a reassuring smile. "I promise I will be back, with Karl and Curt." It was an empty promise he knew, although perhaps it would comfort her.

A soft knock sounded at the front door, and Deborah glanced at the cuckoo clock on the wall. "My goodness! It's half past eleven. Who could that be at this hour?"

Fritz jumped to his feet. "It might be Klint. I'll get it."

But when he opened the door, it was Lydia, looking lovelier than ever, who stood on the porch. Without thinking, he stepped out and pulled the door shut behind him.

Lydia took a step back, into the shadows. He stepped with her and, when she failed to retreat, drew her closer. "I'm sorry." A faint

scent of lavender, a scent he remembered from long ago, reached him.

He didn't know all he apologized for. Perhaps he apologized for fighting with Chance. Perhaps he apologized for leaving her for nine long months.

Looking at her now, how he'd gotten the strength to go was beyond his remembrance. He cursed himself, knowing he'd be leaving her again. He pulled her even closer and dipped his head to capture the feel of those soft lips. She flattened a palm on his chest, and her hand fluttered against him. Instead of dissuading him, it filled him with desire.

She turned her head and sidled away a half step. "Please, Fritz."

With an effort, he moved away and fought for control. The light spilled from the window, and he stopped there and waited for her to speak.

She swallowed. "You should not have fought with Chance. We've been working hard to get our town to come together. Why undo all our good work? Chance loves Deborah and she loves him. Please, give them a chance."

His heart drummed in his chest, a mixture of desire and anger. More than likely, he'd never return. The thought of Chance marrying Deborah and living in his home had galled him into action, and he'd do it again, should the opportunity present itself. Chance Hale's unsuitability for his sister was evident, and he failed to understand how anyone could defend him. Obviously, the sheriff and Lydia did not know Mr. Hale's full background.

He shrugged. "Surely, Deb can find someone more fitting."

"Love is unexplainable. They love each other." Her eyes searched his.

Fritz scoffed. Someone like Chance loved no one, could love no one. Doing what he did during the War took a cold-heart. He would be the last man on earth he would want married to his sister.

Lydia came closer and smiled. "You'll get to know him better and find out he's a kind man. When you come back ..."

"I'm not going anywhere," he lied and frowned at her. Who had told her?

Pink infused her cheeks. "I heard Mr. Caper and Mr. Hale talking. I don't know your plans, although I do know you're leaving. I'll have horses ready at the livery," she said, as if reading his thoughts.

Fritz did not respond, not sure how much she had overheard. To remain silent was preferable to the danger his words might incur.

Tears hovered on her lashes. “Promise me you will be back.”

Although he’d done so for his sister, he could not make such a promise to Lydia. With Deborah, it was different. His sister would have that Yankee, Chance Hale, to comfort her.

Lydia was young, and a pledge to return would give her false hope. If he was killed along with his brothers, no one would know of their demise. To fully face facts, what lay before him was a suicide mission. However, he could not, would not, leave his brothers to die, not without exhausting all within himself to render aid.

And to ask Lydia to wait for him was foolish.

He sighed heavily. “I cannot make a promise beyond my control to keep.”

She was silent for a moment and then cleared her throat, still in the shadows. “I don’t know what happened in the War, something to do with Mr. Hale—”

He snorted. No lady needed to know what had happened in the War—no one, man or woman, should have seen such atrocities. He forced the images from his mind. “You don’t need to know.”

“The War is over, especially here in Brokken. We need healing, not division.”

He crossed his arms. “That might be possible with others but not with Hale.”

“You’re being very hard.”

“That’s what War will do to you.”

She sighed loudly. “I wanted to speak to Deb.”

“Go on in. She’s still up.”

When she opened the door, and the light fell upon her, fully revealed her, his heart leaped to his throat. She glanced at him over her shoulder, her blue eyes pleading with him.

He was glad when she’d gone through and closed the door behind her, leaving him alone with his thoughts.

Chapter Twenty-eight

Lydia had not lingered long. Whatever she'd said to Deborah had paled his sister's cheeks, and Deb soon retired to her room.

Fritz debated whether he needed to lie down for a while, gather his strength, but too much energy surged through him. The road beckoned, and he was restless to be on his way. He went through the house quietly and gathered food and supplies.

At a quarter till six, he checked on Deborah and discovered her bed was empty. He puzzled for a few minutes and finally decided he couldn't chance looking for her, not with the sheriff in the house, who'd be up any minute.

He opened the backdoor wide enough to slip through and closed it softly. Klint waited for him at the end of the street, in the gray light before dawn. Neither man spoke.

Skeins of silver rain, as fine as angel hair, misted around them. Fritz followed Klint to the livery, his hat pulled low against the damp cold.

Lydia came forward from the stable and held out a palm toward them. Fritz stopped and frowned.

It was a moment before his eyes became accustomed to the dark shadows cast around the stable. Two figures were entwined right in front of his eyes—his sister and that Yankee.

He gave a snort of anger and started toward them. Klint grabbed his arm. When Fritz attempted to break away, Klint tightened his hold.

He pulled Fritz back, none too gently. "Do not start fighting. Do you want to jeopardize your mission?"

Although Fritz knew he was right, white-hot anger surged through him. He gave a low growl and pushed Klint forward. "You go break it up, then, before I break Chance Hale's neck. What is he doing here anyway?"

Klint took a step, glanced back over his shoulder, and grinned. "I talked him into going with us."

Fritz gritted his teeth. "I told you no. Deborah told you no."

Klint turned and approached him. "All right. Would you rather he stayed here and wooed Deborah while we're gone?"

Klint had a point. A thought flitted across Fritz's mind of David sending Uriah to the front lines of battle. No, he'd never do that, but what if Chance went with them? That way, Fritz, at the least, could convince Mr. Hale to stay away from Deborah. And if one of them got left behind, with any luck, it would be Chance Hale.

He gave Klint another push. "Get him off my sister and maybe he'll live long enough to go with us."

When Klint approached, Chance and Deborah parted, although his sister still held Chance's hand. Lydia proceeded into the stable, and Fritz gave Deborah a sharp look before he followed. Chance, Deborah, and Klint trailed after them.

Lydia lit a kerosene lamp and turned it on low. The horses were already saddled and ready. Klint and Lydia had done their job. The scabbards on each horse held a rifle, and the saddlebags bulged, so full the supplies Fritz had brought would not fit.

"Do you have a pack mule we can take?" Fritz asked Lydia.

Chance spoke. "We have enough provisions. A mule will slow us down."

Fritz ignored him. "Lydia?"

Lydia smoothed her dress, a fancy dress to wear out to a stable. She nodded. "Yes, but he's a little ornery."

Fritz's glance lingered on her for a moment before he forced it away. "Where's the mule?"

"In the back stall," she replied.

He made his way toward it. Lydia did not follow.

The bridle slipped over the mule's head easily, but when he pulled the mule forward, it balked. Impatiently, he jerked the reins, and the mule kicked out.

Klint looked over the boards of the stall at him. "You trying to wake everyone? We need to get going."

For some reason, his friend's words only made him angrier. He yanked the reins harder and the mule kicked again. Several of the horses whinnied, and the mule brayed.

Fritz ground his teeth, but he was not going to give in to a mule. He managed to get it into the yard, but not without further commotion.

Two figures emerged from the house and came toward them. The man, someone Fritz did not recognize, held a lantern in one hand and a rifle in the other. He raised the lantern higher as they drew near. Heat crept up Fritz's neck.

“Great,” Klint whispered behind him. His friend held the reins of two of the horses. Chance, standing with Deborah, held the reins of another.

Fritz plastered on an impassive face and greeted the eldest Miss Walsh—no, she was Missus now, but her last name escaped him. “Miss Rebecca, it’s good to see you.”

She gave him a distracted greeting and looked beyond him. “Lydia, what’s going on?”

Nothing need come from his ill humor. Lydia’s sister would not try to stop them, Fritz was sure. He answered with a smile on his face. “We were going for a ride and came by for some horses.”

“This early in the morning?” Instead of looking at them, Rebecca directed her question to the man standing next to her.

Fritz was keenly aware of the man’s competence and the rifle he held loosely. Fritz scuffed the toe of his boot in the ground and considered his options. Making a run for it might get one of them hurt, but if they didn’t, Sheriff Vic would be called to escort them to jail. This man would not be easily fooled.

Even as the thought formed, the man spoke. “Rebecca, tell Noah to fetch the sheriff. I heard her tell someone yesterday that Mr. Brokken was confined to his home until further notice. We’ll see what she has to say about this.”

Miss Rebecca took only a couple of steps. Noah must have been watching from the window for he emerged from the house and met his sister. She spoke a few words to him, and he sprinted away.

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THE SKY WAS GROWING lighter, although the gray rain still fell. Lydia felt as gray as the dawn. She blamed herself for the fiasco. Maybe if she had not gone into the house before the men arrived, to change into a nice dress to impress Fritz, none of this would have happened. It had probably been her going in and out that had awoken her sister and her brother-in-law.

And if she’d stayed in the pants and shirt borrowed from her brother, she would have done a better job of bringing the mule out than Fritz had done. She’d seen the look on his face when he’d caught sight of Chance kissing his sister. As angry as he already was with Mr. Hale, that exhibition had made him act foolishly.

A chill ran over her. When Fritz found out that it was she who’d fetched Deborah, he was going to be furious with her. And his was

not the only anger she had to face.

Rebecca rounded on her with narrowed eyes. “Were you helping them, Lydia?”

Lydia licked her lips and linked her hands. Thankfully, Jake saved her.

He touched her sister’s arm and shook his head, taking the lead in an efficient manner. “We’ll deal with that later. Rebecca, get the horses. Lydia, hold the lantern.” Lydia and her sister hurried to obey, and then Jake cocked the gun.

Fritz held up a hand. “There’s no need for that. Put the gun away.”

Jake shook his head. “Not until the sheriff gets here. You three drop your gun belts and move over to that wall. Miss Brokken, please join me over here.”

Deborah slowly released Chance’s hand before she obeyed Jake. The three men complied quickly, and then they waited in silence until Noah arrived back with the sheriff.

The sky was so low that one touch would have caused it to crumple and fall upon them, engulf them in its darkness.

For a moment, the sheriff glanced from one to another in the light of the lantern. The fury in her eyes landed on her lastly, scorching Lydia’s cheeks with fire.

The sheriff dealt with her and Deborah first. “Rebecca, take these girls inside. Please keep an eye on them—they are not to be trusted. Jake, I’d appreciate if you’d walk these three men to the jail. I’ll be right beside you. Too bad I only have one pair of handcuffs with me. Reckon you get the honor, Fritz.”

Lydia bit her lip, and her feet refused to move. Rebecca took her arm, dragging her along, and motioned for Deborah and Noah to follow. The ladies and Noah entered the house, and Lydia gave one last glance over her shoulder. The men had begun moving down the street. The sheriff and Jake walked behind. No one looked in her direction.

Rebecca pulled her into the house and firmly closed the door behind them.

Chapter Twenty-nine

Fritz leaned against the wall at the back of the cell, his arms crossed. “I told you not to bring Chance in on this.”

Klint, on a cot in the cell next to him, glanced at Chance on the other cot and then to Fritz. “What do you mean? It was your own fool self who wanted to take the mule.”

Yes, it was his own fool self, but if Chance had not spoken against it, he probably would have decided it was a foolish thing on his own.

The wall became a punching bag. Solid oak didn’t give and left his knuckles throbbing. He flopped on his cot and stared at the ceiling. They’d been so close to making a clean getaway—just hop in the saddle and go. His temper had again landed him back to square one. No, not square one. He’d been kicked completely off the board.

His brothers would be executed by the time he got out of this cell. Despair washed over him. There was no getting out, no reprieve for the anguish in his soul.

Sheriff Vic had left them to send a telegram to the circuit judge. Fritz tamped down the panic and considered his options.

The bank’s money was safely hidden. Perhaps if he told the judge that he’d return the money, he would go easy on him, give him a shorter prison sentence. He hated he’d brought Klint in this with him. The only bright spot was Chance would go to prison, too. With any luck, Deborah would be married by the time Chance got out.

Would his sister blame him for this mess? For the death of their brothers? Of course she would. It was but one more bit of guilt to drag along behind him.

His throat tightened, and he kept the tears at bay by getting up and punching the wall again and again, not stopping until his knuckles bled.

Klint chastised him, and finally his friend’s words penetrated, or maybe it was the pain, and he stopped. When he turned to face Klint, Chance had stood up, too, and surveyed him solemnly.

“What are you looking at?” Fritz snarled.

Chance tilted his head, and those disturbing eyes of his, as gray and dark as the cloudy sky outside, seemed to see right through him. “What’s going on with Deb’s brothers?”

Klint nodded his encouragement. “It won’t hurt to explain, now that our plans have been interrupted.”

Fritz considered their words and shrugged. “My brothers are currently incarcerated in a Mexican prison and face execution.”

“To save one’s brothers sounds a worthy endeavor.” Chance’s eyes bored into him. “But why are they incarcerated?”

“The why doesn’t matter. Nothing matters. We’re not going anywhere anytime soon.” Fritz flopped on his cot as Sheriff Vic returned.

She brought the stool with her, planting it right outside of Fritz’s cell. Without preamble, she spoke. “Start talking.”

Fritz’s lips twisted into a lopsided smile. “I have nothing to say, Sheriff, except that we were going for a morning ride.”

“You’re funny, Fritz Brokken.” She gained her feet and came closer to the cell, pointing a finger at him. “You find it funny you are breaking your sister’s heart? Find it funny you got these two men in trouble? Funny for doing God knows what? Your father would be ashamed.”

He tilted his head, laughed harshly, and then shrugged. “I don’t think so.”

The sheriff sighed heavily. “I’ve known you for a long time. I would never have expected this of you. Breaking your sister’s heart, not to mention Lydia’s, and acting like you don’t even care.”

He got to his feet, crossed his arms, and scuffed the toe of his boot against the rough floor. He pressed his lips together, the muscles in his jaw tightening.

“If you won’t talk, maybe I can get something out of these two yahoos.” She picked up the stool and placed it in front of the other cell. “Chance, let’s start with you. Deborah is crying her eyes out right now. Tell me why you were helping Fritz to escape.”

“Escape? I didn’t know he was under arrest. We were going for a ride, like he told you. Klint told us he’d spotted some quail down by the lake. Sounded like a mess of quail would be good for supper.” His eyes were round and innocent.

Fritz startled and stilled at the lie, not wanting to draw the sheriff’s attention.

She scoffed. “Is that right? In this rain? And you had three

horses saddled and with enough provisions for two weeks? All to hunt quail?"

"Yes, ma'am. You can't ever be overly prepared when you go hunting." If Fritz didn't know better, a hint of amusement tinged Chance's words.

She tilted her head and frowned. "You do realize, since the Brokken brothers robbed the bank—oh..." She turned to fully face Fritz. "By the way, I just received a telegram from New York. It said no one fitting your description has been seen anywhere near the New York Stock Exchange, not during the last few months. And that name of the man you apprenticed with, Daniel Fitzgerald? He does not live at the address you gave me. Heck, there's not even a house there."

Fritz shrugged "Perhaps I was mistaken."

The sheriff's attention returned to Chance. "Y'all do know I am trying to help you. Tell me the truth so I can do that. If you don't, Chance, there's a good possibility you'll be serving time. Fritz is going to be charged with bank robbery, since his story doesn't hold water. You and Klint, it could be argued, aided him in his attempted jail break."

Fritz snorted, drawing her attention. "I wasn't in jail."

The sheriff shot him a glare. "You were under house arrest. I should have chained you to your bed."

Fritz shrugged. The sheriff turned back to Chance, and her face softened, in a way it never had when she looked at Fritz.

She cleared her throat, and her voice was gentle. "Chance, the town of Brokken was a place for you to start over, to forget your past, and you found a woman who loves you. You're going to throw that away for the likes of that lying Brokken?" Her thumb motioned in his direction.

Fritz straightened. "Hey! There's no need to disparage my character."

She threw him a quick glance. "No, you do a good enough job of that yourself."

Klint laughed until the sheriff's glare got through to him. Fritz hid his own wry smile.

She returned to Chance again. "So, what's it going to be? Fritz is going to be found guilty of bank robbery, and you are going to be caught in the middle of it all. You will be charged as an accessory to a bank robbery, and you're going to do time for that. Do you

understand?"

"Yes, ma'am. You made it clear. Like I said, Klint wanted to go quail hunting..."

The sheriff let out a sound of disgust. "So be it. You're going to lose your freedom over this? I thought you had better sense, Chance Hale."

"I reckon not," he said softly.

She shook her head and turned to Klint. "Anything to add, Mr. Caper?"

"I only wish to corroborate the story Chance has told. Them damn quail. Wish I'd never seen them."

She got to her feet heavily, as if a load of bricks had been strapped to her back. "Times like this I wish I had the stomach for torturing. Give me a day or two, and I might develop a taste for it."

She left, not just the cell area, but they heard her stomping all the way onto the street.

When they heard the outer door click shut, they laughed until tears ran down their cheeks.



LYDIA'S SISTER POKED the wood in the firebox of the woodstove with a savage vengeance, and it responded with jumping flames. The chill in the kitchen dispersed.

Rebecca turned to them, the poker still in her hand, and gestured. "I wouldn't be surprised if Sheriff Vic threw you in jail. Is that what you want?"

Lydia, seated at the table, linked her fingers together in her lap, and shot a sideways glance to Deborah whose face remained composed. Rebecca had grilled them for what seemed like hours.

Lydia sighed softly. "You know we don't want to go to jail. I've told you, I think five times now, that Mr. Caper asked for three horses. I saddled them and met him this morning. Chance was with him, and then Fritz showed up a few minutes later. That's all I know."

Rebecca snorted. "Lydia Marion Walsh, you have never lifted a hand to help at the livery before. What gave you the fool notion to do so now?"

Lydia thinned her lips and spoke through gritted teeth. "You're going to wake mother if you don't calm down."

Rebecca replaced the poker in its place by the stove, took a seat

across from Lydia, and tucked a strand of hair behind her ear. “We’ve known for months that the Brokken brothers robbed the bank, took the town’s money, and hightailed it for who knows where.”

Deborah raised her head but did not speak.

Pink appeared on Rebecca’s cheeks. “Sorry, Deborah, but it’s the unvarnished truth.”

Deborah nodded. “I understand you’re upset, Rebecca, and we are, too. Whatever Fritz was up to, he never confided in me.”

Lydia knew there was no reason to tell Rebecca about Fritz’s apprenticeship in New York. Gossip flew fast and furious in Brokken, Texas.

Rebecca traced a pattern on the table’s oilcloth. “I like your brother, Deborah, always have. It’s difficult to believe the rumors.”

“What rumors?” Lydia asked, leaning forward.

Rebecca scoffed, and her eyes lost their focus for a moment before she blinked. “Some are outlandish. Some have a ring of truth. Some folks say Deborah’s brothers traveled to Virginia, where her father had hidden a cache of weapons, in order to recover them, to prove that he had not stolen them as has been widely reported.”

“That doesn’t sound too outlandish,” Lydia said.

Rebecca shrugged. Before she spoke again, her cheeks reddened. “Others say they’d gone to California to use the town’s money to open a brothel.”

Lydia shook her head at that. “That’s not true. Have you seen Fritz? He’s lost weight, and, as Mother would say, looks peaked. I don’t think he was somewhere investing in a brothel.”

“My brothers would never do that,” Deborah added. For the first time, emotion infused her cheeks, anger or embarrassment, Lydia didn’t know.

Rebecca waved a hand. “I’m not here to impugn dishonor on the Brokken name.”

Lydia bit her bottom lip. “Too late for that.”

Rebecca got to her feet and opened the door to the firebox to add another piece of wood. She used the edge of her apron to shut the door. Instead of sitting back down, she paced the small kitchen. “The sheriff will be back sooner or later to talk to you. I want to hear the story one more time.”

The chair had become uncomfortable, and Lydia longed to pace the room as her sister was doing. “I visited Deborah, and with one

thing and another, it was late when I left. Walking home, I met Mr. Caper. He asked me if I'd have three horses saddled early this morning, and I agreed."

"And one of them you saddled was Lucky. You knew Deborah was giving that horse to Fritz. Why would you let Mr. Caper have him unless you knew Fritz would be there?"

That was the sticking point that Lydia did not have a ready answer for. She shrugged her shoulders. "One horse looks a lot like another in the early morning."

"And you didn't ask Mr. Caper why he needed three horses?"

"I assumed he had his reasons."

"And why didn't you tell me all this when you returned last night? You know Jake and I are in charge of the livery and would have taken care of it."

"I didn't want to wake you. I told you it was late when I arrived home."

Rebecca turned to Deborah. "And here's where you girls need to get your story straight. Deborah *happened* to be out for an early morning stroll. Heck, it wasn't even daybreak. Plus, it had already begun to rain."

Lydia caught Deborah's eyes and held them for a second. Deborah broke away and glanced down. "Something woke me, and I couldn't get back to sleep. I decided to get a head start on the day and got up and dressed. I then headed to the bank, to get to work."

"And you saw your brother and stopped for a chat?"

Deborah raised her head. "Yes, Rebecca. Sheriff Vic told him not to leave the house. I wondered what was going on."

"And did he tell you?"

Deborah tilted her chin a notch. "You and Jake came out before he had a chance."

Lydia glared at her sister. "We've had enough of this. Are you working for the sheriff or are you my sister?"

"I am your sister, but I'm trying to help you, to prepare you for the sheriff's interrogation. Tell the truth. Don't try to protect Fritz." Her fist slammed to the table.

Deborah's cheeks paled. Lydia's heart felt pierced with a thousand lances. Neither could protect Fritz, as much as they wanted.

Rebecca's glance traveled to Deborah. "I know he's your brother, Deborah, but we must arrive at the truth, even if it hurts Fritz."

Deborah remained silent, and Lydia's heart went out to her.

Even if Lydia could not protect Fritz, neither would she betray him. Anger tinged her words to her sister. "I am not his judge, and neither are you, Rebecca. You've questioned us enough."

Rebecca narrowed her eyes at her sister, as angry as Lydia had ever seen her. "I have one more thing, and you cannot explain this, try as you might. You changed out of your livery work clothes into a dress before Fritz arrived. You're sweet on him and knew he was on his way. Don't bother to deny it."

Lydia didn't. She blinked away tears and bowed her head to pray.

Chapter Thirty

The sheriff arrived after lunch to fetch Lydia and Deborah. By then, Lydia's mother had prostrations, even after Lydia assured her she'd done nothing wrong. She explained, as much as she could, that the sheriff only wanted to question them. Rebecca stepped in to back her up, and, as angry as Lydia remained, she was grateful for her sister's help.

Even Sheriff Vic was gentle with her mother and assured her that Lydia was not in trouble even though that was not the whole truth.

It was a short walk to the jail, where Lydia assumed they were heading. Instead, Sheriff Vic led them to a buggy, the Brokken buggy. Isaac was on the seat and jumped down when they approached. Deborah ran to him, and he wrapped his arms around her. Tears came to Lydia's eyes, and she wished she had someone who would comfort her. Deborah cried on his shoulder for but a moment before the sheriff tore her away and motioned to the open door.

Instead of climbing in the buggy, Deborah moved to Lydia's side. The girls clasped hands.

The sheriff's stance was rigid, the muscles in her face taut. "Get inside, ladies. We're going for a ride."

This was not what Lydia had expected, and her mouth was suddenly dry. She exchanged a look with Deborah before they obeyed the sheriff. Lydia settled in beside Deborah and blinked away tears when Deborah grasped her hand again. Sheriff Vic sat across from them and studied each in turn.

They braced for the sheriff's questions. Deborah's nearness gave Lydia strength. If Deborah could do this, she could, too. Lydia might be losing Fritz, but Deborah was losing her brother and, perhaps, her fiancé. Lydia had to be strong for Deborah, and the thought made her tilt her chin to meet the sheriff's gaze steadily.

The sheriff leaned back, resting her head against the back of the buggy, although with the jolting, Lydia knew she could not be comfortable. Exhaustion on the sheriff's face was evident. Sheriff Vic passed a hand over her eyes, and they rode in silence for a few

minutes.

The sheriff stirred, as if she'd dozed for a moment. "Let's get this clear, ladies. Are you going to tell the truth as to why those three men and you two were at the livery this morning?"

Lydia grasped Deborah's hand tighter before she answered. "Mr. Caper asked for three horses, and I got them for him."

The sheriff sighed heavily. "So, that means no. Anything to add, Deborah?"

"I was on my way to the bank and saw them at the livery. I stopped to speak."

Sheriff Vic leaned forward and rested her elbows on her knees and looked to Deborah. "As I told your brother and Chance, I'm trying to help them. I need the truth to do that."

Deborah shrugged. "We don't know anything. Lydia and I have no idea where they were going or why."

The sheriff sighed deeply. "I've sent for the circuit judge. I got word this morning that your brother was never in New York, leastwise, not at the place he'd said he'd been."

A gasp escaped Lydia's lips although she'd been expecting this. Deborah leaned against her, as if all the strength had deserted her.

The sheriff's eyes were dull. "And you did not have any contact with Fritz, either of you, all this time he was gone?"

They both shook their heads.

Tears hovered on the sheriff's lashes. "I see no other outcome for this. Fritz Brokken will be found guilty of bank robbery, and Chance and Klint will be going down with him."

Deborah trembled beside her but did not cry. A sob tore itself from Lydia's throat, despite her effort to suppress it, leaving behind a rawness.

The sheriff straightened, and her spine became rigid. "Unless you ladies help me out?"

Lydia shook her head. Nothing they said would help the three men but would only hurt them. When she spoke, her voice was hoarse. "We don't know anything else. I'm sorry."

Misery engulfed Lydia, and she leaned her head against the window pane of the buggy but found no relief.

Deborah spoke softly. "Vic, will you take me by the jail and let me speak to my brother? Please."

"You think your brother will give you further information?" The weariness was evident in her voice and in the slump of her

shoulders. The sheriff was far from heartless. A pang pierced Lydia's heart for thinking her so.

Deborah nodded her head. "I believe he will. I would like to speak to him alone, please."

Lydia cast her friend a look of surprise. "I'll go with you, Deb."

"Thank you for the offer, but I think he'd be more forthcoming if I spoke to him alone." Deborah did not glance at her but kept her eyes on the sheriff.

Sheriff Vic nodded at Deb. "I'm not letting him out of his cell. You'll have to speak to him in front of Klint and Chance."

Deborah nodded, and the sheriff tapped on the side of the buggy and called Isaac's name.

Lydia leaned closer to Deborah and whispered. "Are you sure you don't want me to go with you?"

Deborah straightened and shook her head. "This is something I must do alone." After another moment, she whispered in Lydia's ear. "Keep Vic occupied while I'm in there."

Lydia nodded. "I'll do my best."

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FRITZ LAY ON THE COT with his hat over his eyes and must have dozed. The commotion outside his cell startled him. His feet hit the floor before he was fully awake.

The sheriff stood outside his cell with his sister and motioned Deborah forward. "She wants to talk to you."

The sheriff left. Deborah cast a look at Chance and shook her head when he started to speak. She put a finger to her lips until the sheriff's footsteps faded away.

Fritz picked up the cue from his sister and whispered. "What are you doing here, Deb?"

"I am going to break you out. Be ready." Her turquoise eyes flashed.

"How do you plan to do that?" Chance asked quietly.

Chance and Klint moved as close to them as the bars allowed. Deborah spared Chance a quick glance before turning back to Fritz.

A muscle twitched in her jaw. "Before I do, tell me what's going on."

Fritz debated on how much to tell his sister but decided she had a right to know. "Our father was responsible for a supply cache at the end of the War, and it disappeared. He was accused of selling it

to the Union and hiding the gold for his own profit."

Deborah frowned at him, impatience in her eyes. "Yes, I know all of that."

Chance and Klint were listening. Fritz shrugged. It didn't matter. "It's partly true. Our father did sell it, but not to the Unionists and not for profit. Everyone knew the War was over. The men were tired of the deprivation, the senseless killing."

He couldn't help but shoot a glare in Chance's direction, although his anger toward the man had abated since Chance had stuck his neck out and lied for him.

Deborah reached through the bars to poke Fritz's hand. "We don't have all day."

"Sorry," he mumbled. "He sold the guns and ammunition but not to the Unionists. He sold the guns to a representative of Maximilian. Curt, Karl, and I went into Mexico to purchase them back, to prove our father had not betrayed the Confederacy."

"Wasn't that just as bad, to sell supplies to someone trying to establish a monarchy in Mexico?"

"No, because the War was over—it was only a matter of time. Many of the former Confederate soldiers had already joined with Maximilian and were fighting against Juárez's soldiers. The part that matters is that our father did not side with the Unionists or have any dealings with them." He forced himself not to glare at Chance again.

His sister's eyes narrowed. "It shouldn't matter one way or the other. It's all in the past, and we must move on, whatever side we were on during the War. We must bring our country back together, not continue to bicker."

"Regardless, it's what we set out to do—to restore our family name. The truth is that grudges will be held for a very long time—atrocities from the War are not so easy to forget."

Klint nodded. "It makes sense to me that Fritz wanted to clear your father's name."

Fritz shot him a grateful look. "To tell the whole truth, Father gave me the gold from the transaction. After the War, I gave the money to Curt who made some investments. At first, they didn't do well, but now we've more than doubled our money."

"I don't understand. If you had money, why did you take the town's money?" Her mouth set in a hard line.

"Simply as a precaution. We figured we'd meet up with Juárez's

men sooner or later and had no way of knowing how much gold we might need. We weren't stupid enough to carry the money with us but hid it, not far from here. We carried enough to convince Juárez's men we had more. Unfortunately, it didn't work when we ran across his forces near Corpus Christi. We were captured, accused of being spies for Maximilian, and scheduled for execution."

Deborah put a hand to her heart. "And how did you escape? And what of Curt and Karl?"

Fritz studied the floor. Some things did not bear repeating. He simplified it. "We overpowered the guards, stole some horses, and hightailed it out. Somehow, our brothers were recaptured. That was a week ago. If Klint, Chance, and I left now, it would still take a week to catch up with them. And that's if Juárez's men haven't already executed Karl and Curt for trying to escape."

"Why not tell the sheriff of this? Perhaps she could help, somehow." Deborah's eyes searched his.

He shook his head. "It still amounts to the same thing. We robbed the bank. And Sheriff Vic, no matter how much I admire her spunk, is no match for Juárez's men. And the state of Texas is not going to get involved in struggle for power in Mexico. We're on our own."

"And you think you three have a chance to rescue Karl and Curt?" She didn't look skeptical, only inquisitive. She looked down and whispered, "If they are still alive, that is."

Fritz cast a look to Klint and Chance, and they gave a nod. He looked back to his sister. "I think so. At least, we have to try."

Deborah raised her head and nodded. "In that case, we have no time to waste. Be ready."

Chapter Thirty-one

Fritz felt Chance observing him with those uncanny eyes. They were downright spooky. “What are you looking at?” Fritz snapped. He had to keep reminding himself Chance was on his side.

Chance appeared calm but reminded Fritz of a rattlesnake coiled and ready to strike. “I heard what was said, although my opinion was not asked.”

“Nor do I want it now.” Fritz felt like punching something again, although his knuckles still ached.

“Since I am a part of this ...”

Fritz waved a hand. “I didn’t want your help to begin with. Stay behind if you are having second thoughts.”

Klint moved to stand next to Chance. “Give him an opportunity to speak, Fritz. If all you say is true, we have our work cut out for us. It’s convinced me more than ever that we need Chance’s help.”

Fritz narrowed his eyes. “Are you wanting to pull out, too?”

“I didn’t say that. We need to have a plan in place and not jump in without knowing how deep the water is.”

Fritz sat down on the edge of his cot and rested his elbows on his knees. “Speak up. I’m listening.”

Chance spoke first. “I don’t like Deborah involved with this. If she’s caught, she’s going to prison with the rest of us.”

Klint nodded in agreement. “It’ll be bad enough for us.”

“Tell me what choice I have? Leave my brothers to their fate? Deborah doesn’t want that any more than I do.”

“Is she going to be riding with us?” Klint asked. “If so, she’s in danger of being captured by Juárez’s men, as you and your brothers were.”

“I guess we can figure it out later. It depends on how she plans to get us out of here.” Fritz linked his fingers together and grimaced with pain. He’d hit the wall one time too often.

A muscle in Chance’s jaw twitched, and his eyes narrowed. “Sheriff Vic will find out she helped, however she does it. We cannot leave her behind.”

“We’ll cross that bridge when we come to it.” Fritz stood and walked to the outer wall. The window was set high and reinforced

with bars with no way out. If he could figure a way out before Deborah could, it would be one less worry for him. He walked to the door of the cell and checked the lock. Even if he knew how to pick it, he had nothing to use.

He sat back down on his cot. There was nothing to do but wait.

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LYDIA HAD DONE HER best to keep the sheriff occupied. She'd ask Sheriff Vic if Deborah's grandparents had been informed of the latest developments with Fritz. The sheriff agreed to take a quick trip to the Brokken Arrow Ranch, and she allowed Lydia to accompany her. They had not tarried. Deborah's grandparents had little interest in the fate of their step-grandson and asked no questions.

They'd returned just as Deborah descended the steps from the jail. When the sheriff asked her if Fritz had shared any new information, Deborah shook her head.

Sheriff Vic appeared unsure what to do next, and Deborah exchanged a glance with Lydia.

Finally, the sheriff glanced at Mr. Isaac. "I know you're busy at the ranch, with Chance in jail, but do you think you could watch these two for me?"

"I left the Jennings brothers in charge at the ranch, and they can handle things fine. I'm here for as long as you need me." He spoke to the sheriff, but his eyes were on Deborah.

"Good. Deb and Lydia, go with Isaac. I'll check on both of y'all later. Do not leave the house."

"Someone needs to check on the bank," Deborah said. "We cannot leave it closed for this long."

"It's little more than half a day," the sheriff said.

Lydia looked to the sun and noted from its position that it was getting close to supper. "We must check to see if there are any customers who have been waiting. It will only take a few minutes," she said to the sheriff.

"If Mr. Isaac is willing to supervise you, it's fine by me. I'm going to be at Abby's for a while, if you need me. But please plan not to." With that parting shot, she walked away.

Deborah and Lydia got into the buggy, but before they'd gone only a few feet, Deborah called Mr. Isaac. She jumped from the buggy before it'd come to a full stop. "Take Lydia to the bank. I'm

staying here."

Mr. Isaac shook his head. "You know I can't do that, Miss Deborah."

"I'm not going anywhere until I get Fritz out of jail."

Lydia joined Deborah on the sidewalk. No one was nearby, and luckily, the rain had abated. After Mr. Isaac looked around, as if to be certain the sheriff had indeed left, he joined them.

Deborah pulled them into the alley between the funeral home and jail. "Karl and Curt are being held by Juárez's men near Corpus Christi, if they haven't moved on. Fritz came to get Klint to help him. If my brothers are to be rescued, I've got to get Fritz out now."

"Why not tell the sheriff?" Lydia asked.

Mr. Isaac answered her. "No lawman is going to get involved in Mexico's political situation, not even the federal government. You have two men in Mexico vying for power. The United States will not be pulled into another war."

"But why ..." Lydia began.

Deborah held up a hand. "I don't have time to explain. I must get Fritz out now. You two do not want to be involved in this. Isaac, take Lydia to the bank. Please."

"Don't tell us what to do, Deborah Brokken." Lydia tilted her chin.

Mr. Isaac nodded. "Those boys have been like sons to me. I'll do what I can to help."

"What's your plan?" Lydia asked.

"I don't have one. I figured something would present itself." Deborah looked sheepish.

Lydia took her hand. "I have an idea. I'll need the mule, and we'll need horses, for us and them." She indicated the jail with a tilt of her head.

"I think I can help, also," Isaac said. "I'll go by and see if I can get Jake and Rebecca out to the ranch with me. That way, it'll be clear for you to get the horses and mule. I'll tell them ... Well, I'll think of something."

"Go," Deborah said.

He didn't tarry but drove the buggy away. Lydia pulled Deborah around to the back of the jail. "See that window? One of us will climb up, tie a rope around the bars, and hope the mule can pull the whole wall down."

"I don't think it'll work." Deborah frowned at the wall.

“We won’t know until we try. Let’s find some rope. While we’re finding that, it will give Isaac enough time to get Jake and Rebecca out to the ranch. And then we’ll get the horses and mule.”

“What if someone sees?”

Lydia shrugged. “It doesn’t matter unless it’s the sheriff. Just smile and say howdy.”

Deborah grinned. “And let’s change into pants. It’ll make it much easier during our getaway.”

The girls giggled for a moment and then set off to look for the rope.



DARKNESS WAS GATHERING when Fritz heard a sound outside, coming from the back. Lydia’s face appeared at the window.

“I’m tying rope around the bars. We’ll see if the mule can pull down this wall,” she said and set to work to tie it.

Fritz had his doubts, but in only a few minutes, a gaping hole appeared where the window had once been, large enough for him to climb through. However, it did not extend into the other cell. He grabbed the rope and tied it around the bars that separated the two cells, and it soon crumpled enough for Klint and Chance to make their way through.

“I didn’t think that would work,” Fritz said to Deborah, once he’d climbed through.

“You should not have doubted. Remember our original name was Brecheisen, breaker of iron. Those bars didn’t stand a chance.”

They both chuckled until Lydia grabbed Fritz’s arm. “The horses are in the alley. Let’s go.”

They were soon mounted and did not tarry but headed down West Street, across the bridge, before turning north.

Fritz knew no one was better at hiding a trail than Chance Hale and asked him to take the lead. They headed north for a reason although Fritz did not tell them until they’d followed Blueberry Creek upstream for ten miles or more. They kept close to the trees, growing along the creek’s shore, close enough that the horses’ left no print in the browned fallen leaves not yet blown away by the wind. Chance made sure they were not close to the mud that would have slowed their progress and betrayed their position.

Fritz found the spot they headed for easily and called for Chance to halt. He dismounted and let the reins fall to the ground. The flat

rock looked just as he remembered it. Chance and Klint joined him but asked no questions.

He hardened the muscles in his jaw and motioned the girls over. “This is where we buried the town’s gold. Help me with the rock.” The rock was heavy, at least a hundred pounds, but the men were strong enough to lift it easily and set it down nearby.

The gold was not deeply buried, and Fritz used the pickaxe to quickly remove the top layer of dirt. Chance helped him lift the wooden box from the ground.

Fritz checked it quickly to be sure it had not been previously disturbed. All the money appeared untouched.

“The horses need water. We’ll take them down to the creek,” Klint said. He and Chance set off.

Deborah and Lydia huddled together a few yards away, speaking quietly. He walked over to them, brushing his hands against his pants.

“What are you two talking about?” he asked. Being freed from the jail and finally able to pursue his mission had him grinning despite the long, arduous journey that lay before them.

Lydia answered. “We’re going back.”

A muscle in his jaw began to twitch. “Are you crazy? You can’t go back. Sheriff Vic will throw you in jail.”

“What jail?” Deborah asked, her eyes twinkling.

They laughed, and Chance and Fritz came up from the creek.

“What’s funny?” Klint asked.

Fritz pointed a thumb at Lydia and Deborah. “They want to go back to town.”

“They’ll be arrested,” Chance said flatly. His eyes grew dark.

“Lydia and I were talking,” Deborah said to Chance. “We decided if we went back now, intercepted the sheriff and her posse, we could give y’all more time to be on your way.”

Pink tinged Lydia’s cheeks. “Truth be told, I am not good at riding a horse. It’s my own darn fault for not learning more. I’d slow y’all down, and if anything happened to any of you, I’d never forgive myself.” Her words may have been for all of them, but her eyes remained on Fritz.

Deborah smiled. “Plus, we have another bargaining chip…”

“What?” Chance asked.

Lydia smiled. “The gold. I want you boys to put it back, just as it was. After we get back to town, we’ll tell the sheriff that you told us

where the gold was hidden. She'll think you're headed here and that will give you more time to get ahead of her."

"And then what?" Chance asked.

"I don't know," Deborah bit her lip. "Maybe we'll share the truth then. You should be well on your way. Maybe she'll understand."

"But if she doesn't, you and Lydia will be tried and convicted." Chance's breathing became ragged. Fritz almost felt sorry for him.

"I trust the sheriff," Fritz said.

Chance glared at him. "We can't count on it. They'll be sticking their necks out for us."

Klint punched Chance's arm. "It's their decision. But they need to decide quickly, whatever it is. We need to get going."

"He's right," Fritz said. "I'm not going to make this decision for Lydia or Deborah. They're intelligent enough to make it."

Deborah touched Chance's arm, and he turned his back on her and walked away, in the direction of a clump of trees. Deborah shot Fritz a harried look and then followed Chance, running a little to catch up.

"If we're about to leave, let's get the money reburied."

"Can you help, Lydia?" Fritz asked.

The three of them soon had the chest reburied, and the rock on top. Klint took a branch to smooth the dirt, attempting to make it look as if it had been undisturbed.

As he worked, Fritz pulled Lydia aside. "Are you sure you do not want to go with us? Chance does not want Deborah to go back."

"I see that. If she wants to continue with you, I'll go back by myself."

Fritz nodded. Cold knots of fear formed in his stomach. "What if you are arrested?"

"Well, I can't be thrown into jail, so it will have to be house arrest. It shouldn't be too bad." She smiled although her chin quivered.

He took her hand and held it against his cheek. "But if we don't come back…"

Lydia smiled. "I have faith in you, Fritz Brokken. You will be back."

His eyes met hers, and he could not look away. He leaned in, and his lips caressed hers for a moment before he pulled away. "I plan on returning, but plans can be derailed."

"We both have trials to get through, but I'll wait for you." She

laughed, the laugh that sent a shiver up his spine. “If I’m arrested, you can be sure I’ll wait.”

They both laughed.

She pulled her hand loose and raised her arms to wrap them around his neck. She cradled the back of his head, and he needed no more encouragement than that to pull her closer.

Her soft lips yielded to his, and he forgot all, at least for a fleeting moment, until his sister interrupted.

“What do you think you’re doing, Fritz?”

He pulled away enough to smile at his sister over Lydia’s shoulder. “And what have you decided?”

“I am going with you, unless you think I’ll slow you down?” She puckered her forehead.

Fritz laughed. “You’re a better horseman than me, er, horsewoman.”

“And don’t forget smart. Together, we can figure out a way to free Karl and Curt.”

“As smart as a whip,” Fritz agreed.

Chance and Klint joined them, and Fritz held Lydia’s hand. The clouds were breaking up, revealing the blue of the sky.

The way ahead was dark, foreboding, but the light lay beyond. Not just beyond but in each of his friends.

Most of all, in Lydia, whose blue eyes perfectly matched the brightening skies. And he did not care who watched. He gathered her in his arms to bid her a proper good-bye.

Brokken Redeemed: Chance and Deborah

December 1867

Chapter Thirty-two

The coldness seeped into Chance Hale's bones as it had done four long years ago, when he'd wintered in a field near Nashville. His time with the Union army had been so long ago, and yet he carried it within him wherever he went, forever near, forever present, even as he bedded down the horses.

He'd kept to himself that winter of the War, an outcast, he'd thought. Now, he knew better. The other soldiers had been in awe of him, feared him as some feared a ghost. God's hand had been upon him, and that frightened many folks, even God-fearing ones.

The light of the campfire drew his gaze. Chance shook his head at the foolishness as he bent to tie the hobbles around the legs of the horses. He'd argued with Deborah's pigheaded brother against building a fire, for all the good it'd done. They'd ridden long and hard and needed to leave at first light. They should have been in their bedrolls by now, instead of sitting around a campfire. The sound of Fritz, Deborah, and Klint Caper's voices drifted to him. Who knew how far that sound traveled?

For two men who had fought in the same war he had, they should've known better. This careless—no, reckless—behavior was going to get them killed.

He debated a moment on whether to join the three or head to bed. It was Deborah, more than the warmth of the fire, that drew him. He took a seat across from the three and stretched out his legs. Now that the fire was made, it wouldn't hurt to get warm, even though he needed to keep his guard up. Old habits died hard, and he deliberately settled into a position where he could see the others from the corner of his eye without gazing directly into the fire and losing his night vision.

Deborah was next to her brother on a blanket pulled close to the fire. Her brother and Klint were seated next to her, one on each side, all of them watching the flickering flames.

Chance tamped down his anger, and some other emotion he had

difficulty identifying. He pulled up a name for it ... jealousy. He didn't like Deborah sitting so close to Klint. Even now, Klint leaned forward, tilted his head, and flashed his dimples at her. Chance rubbed a toe of his boot into the dirt and crossed his arms, looking in the direction of the horses, although they were hidden behind the trees. His jaw clenched until it ached.

This had been a fool's errand. Why had he allowed Klint to talk him into this? Before they arrived at their destination, Deborah would be sharing that blue-eyed devil's bedroll. He cast a sideways glance in Deborah's direction.

She leaned against her brother and settled a hand on his arm. "Lydia will be fine, Fritz."

"Lydia said she was not a good horsewoman. What if her horse throws her?" Fritz lifted his head and frowned at Chance, as if somehow it was his fault.

Klint laughed. "She's been around horses her entire life. She was being modest."

Chance couldn't picture the always impeccably dressed Lydia Walsh mucking out a stall, much less riding, but to be fair, she'd gotten the horses ready for them. He frowned at Klint's easy laugh but agreed with him. Surely, she knows how to ride since her family owns the livery.

Fritz turned to look over his sister's head to Klint. "Why would she insist on returning to town?"

Chance almost felt sorry at the despair evident in his voice. Fritz's eyes glittered in the light from the flames of the fire.

Deborah patted her brother's arm. "Lydia gave us a head start, thought she could lead the sheriff on a wild goose chase. It will surely help us."

Fritz met Chance's eyes in a challenge as he wrapped an arm around Deborah's shoulders. "Deborah should have stayed with her."

Chance held Fritz's gaze but did not deign to answer. Yet, his conscience stabbed him. It was his fault Deborah had made the decision to ride with them. He feared what would happen if she returned to town, after breaking them out of jail, but hadn't he put her in more danger by persuading her to accompany them?

Lydia probably had been arrested as soon as she entered town, and her humiliation would have been easier to bear with a friend, with Deborah. And wouldn't being in jail be safer for both? He

shrugged. It was too late now, and he hadn't forced Deborah, had he?

No, he'd only made her feel sorry for him, sorry enough to accompany them instead of riding back with Lydia. He'd made progress, learned to forgive himself for what he'd done in the War, and yet, guilt assailed him, ambushed, assaulted him with feelings of worthlessness.

Deborah's tender heart yearned to mend his own, and he'd manipulated that heart by his behavior.

He inhaled deeply and breathed out a sigh. A future with a clean conscience, with a chance at true happiness, hung out of reach, like the fruit above Tantalus, forever taunting him.

Deborah wriggled from her brother's hold. "If you are accusing Chance of forcing me to come, you could not be more wrong. I did it on my own volition."

Fritz laughed harshly. "So, are you saying if it'd just been Klint and me, you would have joined us?"

"Yes! Curt and Karl are my brothers, too." A stubborn look made her mouth twist upward at one corner.

Skepticism crossed Fritz's face. For once, Chance agreed with Fritz's assessment. If not for him, Deborah would be safely in town, even if under house arrest. Chance moved guiltily. Part of it had been he'd wanted Deborah with him, could not bear to be parted from her. He snorted. He was a lovesick moron.

A movement in the brush caught his eye. He was already on his feet, pulling his knife from its sheath. "Shh..."

"Don't kill them, Chance. It may be someone from town," Deborah pleaded.

He shushed her and moved forward. Even though he'd kept his eyes turned from the direct flames, he found it almost impossible to see. There was no moon, and clouds obscured the stars.

He crept silently, one hand before him, the knife in his other hand by his side, his muscles tensed and ready.

He paused and strained his ears to hear. He startled when Fritz spoke beside him.

"Probably just a rabbit." He'd not bothered to keep his voice down, and Chance shot him a glare that Fritz could not see.

Chance felt, rather than saw, a figure dart past them, heading away from camp, in the direction of the horses.

He ran, not after the figure, but toward the horses, to stop

whoever it was from stealing them. “Get the rifle,” he whispered harshly to Klint, over his shoulder.

As he approached, the horses stamped their feet and neighed softly. Whoever or whatever Chance had seen was not in the vicinity. Klint, rifle in his hands, came panting up beside him.

“Where are they?” he whispered.

Chance shrugged and realized Klint probably couldn’t see him. “I don’t know about ‘they.’ I only saw one.”

“Where did he go?” Klint was now fully alert, his gaze darting around.

“No idea. You go that way, and I’ll check over here.” He pointed to his left, and Klint gave a short nod and obeyed.

After a few minutes, Chance called off the search. They were wasting precious time. Whoever it had been may have left to bring back reinforcements.

He called Klint over. “Help me saddle the horses.”

“What? We’re leaving?” It was too dark to see Klint’s face, to read his expression.

Chance was tired and wished he could ignore whoever it had been but knew from experience that would be unwise. “What other choice do we have?”

He’d already bent to remove the ropes from one of the horse’s legs. His eyes had acclimated to the dark, or perhaps some of the clouds had dispersed, to allow more stars to appear overhead, affording him greater light. His gaze swept the area. Nothing seemed amiss. What if he’d imagined the figure? Or what if it had been a rabbit? No, whatever it was, it’d been large, upright, not an animal.

Besides, the horses’ ears were pricked, perhaps from an outsider’s presence. Just as likely, it was from Chance’s actions.

Klint grumbled a bit, but they got the horses saddled and went back toward the campsite and the fire. Deborah and Fritz were nowhere to be seen. For a moment, his heart beat a harsh tattoo at the base of his throat until the brother and sister emerged from the brush.

Deborah came up to him and placed a hand on his arm. “We’ve looked around and didn’t see anyone.”

Fritz frowned at him. “Why are the horses saddled?”

Klint answered for him. “Chance thinks we need to leave.”

Fritz’s frown deepened. “That’s nonsense. We have to get some

sleep, or we'll be dead tired tomorrow."

"Someone was in the brush. Could have been the Andrews Gang. I heard they were in the area." Chance spoke softly and dipped his head. He did not wish to frighten Deborah.

"Last I heard, they were down near the Mexican line. Besides, I saw no one," Fritz said, his voice a growl.

Klint's eyes crinkled, as if amused. "You're here now, Fritz. Why couldn't they be, too? We don't want to get entangled with them. They'd as soon kill you as look at you."

Fritz snorted. "The Andrews Gang? Why would they be here? Chance saw no one—just his imagination running wild."

Maybe it was Fritz's doubt that strengthened his belief, but Chance was now certain someone had scouted the camp.

"Let's unsaddle the horses," Fritz said, giving a nod to Klint.

Klint hesitated and looked from one to the other. Deborah, casting a glance at Chance, moved away to stand by her brother.

Fritz moved forward to take the reins from Klint's hands and then uncinched the saddle.

Deborah tilted her head toward Chance. "I'm too tired to think straight. All the stress we've been through. I'm sure your imagination played tricks on you, Chance."

"I'm not going anywhere tonight," Fritz said firmly and pulled the saddle from his horse.

A muscle in Chance's jaw twitched and made him aware that he clenched his teeth. He looked from Fritz to Deborah. Her hands were clasped in front of her.

"Deborah?" He kept his voice strong and firm yet questioning.

"Yes?" In the darkness, her chin tilted.

Dang it. She was going to make him say it. "I'm leaving. Are you coming with me?"

Instead of answering, she looked to Fritz. "Will you come with us, Fritz?"

"Go, but I'm staying here. I need to rest." He held Lucky's reins. Lucky, the horse Deborah had chosen for Lydia's sister to train, shook his head and gave a snort.

Chance fiddled with the reins he still held. His muscles were so tense, he ached. "*Deborah.*" This time it was not a question but a challenge.

"I can't leave Fritz. He's the one in charge." Her voice also had strengthened with resolve.

The hairs on the back of his neck stood on end. As far as he knew, they could be surrounded. “I’m not staying. I can’t when there was someone watching us, may still be watching.”

Deborah’s shoulders stiffened, and her glance traveled to each man in turn. “Did anyone else see anything?”

“There was no one. I’m sure of it.” Fritz’s gaze met Chance’s again, the challenging evident, even in the darkness, with only the campfire providing enough light to see.

He was not going to allow Fritz’s pigheadedness to get them killed. “We need to go, and we need to go now.”

Klint stepped forward, as if to keep the peace. “What if we took turns on guard?”

Chance was beyond angry. “Do what you want. I’m leaving. Come with me, if you want or stay.” His words were for Deborah, but she did not answer.

Klint spoke instead. “You and I can ride ahead, Chance. Deborah and Fritz can catch up with us, or we’ll double back.”

Chance’s only answer was to walk forward, leading his horse away from them.

Deborah called out. “Wait.”

He stopped but did not turn. She came beside him and placed a hand on his arm.

He licked his lips, and his voice was hoarse when he spoke, husky with hurt. “We need to leave, Deborah.”

“But can’t we set up guard, like Klint said?” She was close enough that he could see tears stood in her eyes.

He wrapped an arm around her waist and pulled her to him. Their bodies melded as one. His lips found her warm ones, and he kissed her. His arms tightened around her, and his kiss intensified, until Fritz made a scoff and brought him to his senses.

Deborah’s breathing was ragged when he released her. “Chance. Please.” She took a wavering step back and held out her hands in a plea. “Don’t go.”

He forced himself forward, away from Deborah, and fought to control the emotions swirling through him.

All he knew was he couldn’t stay. He mounted his horse, and his hands shook but he willed them to still. Tears pricked the back of his eyes, but what could he do? They were all going to be killed in their sleep if they didn’t go. Deborah moved up beside his horse, her face upturned.

His heart twisted, almost from his chest. “Come with me,” he pleaded.

She shook her head. “I can’t leave Fritz. He said he won’t go even if I do. Please understand.”

Without answering, he urged the horse forward, forcing Deborah back. As soon as he dared, he dug his heels into the horse’s sides. The cold wind grew colder as he galloped away, piercing his lungs, and he pulled up his bandana to help filter the coldness.

After a few minutes, he reined the horse to a trot. His heart had grown jagged edges, sending pangs through him. How could one woman affect him so? And how could he have left her in danger?

He had no idea what lay ahead, and there was no need in riding pell-mell into the unknown. He slowed the horse to a walk. The clouds had dispersed enough to allow dim starlight to filter through.

He rode about half an hour when Klint caught up with him. “You’re a fool, Chance Hale.”

“Why?” Chance didn’t look in Klint’s direction.

“You should have waited for me. What if you’d ridden toward the sheriff? Or stumbled upon the Andrews Gang? Alone? We don’t know who that was spying on us.”

Chance’s shoulders relaxed. At least Klint believed he’d seen someone. They rode along in silence, heading south, as far as Chance could judge. The stars played hide and seek with the clouds, more often hidden than not, leaving him confused. He wished daylight would arrive to give him a better idea.

At least Klint’s arrival had slowed his heartbeat to normal, although his fear did not abate. As soon as it was daylight, they’d circle back and make sure Deborah and Fritz were safe. He berated himself for leaving her, but they’d be reunited soon. He comforted himself with the thought.

The clouds completely obscured the stars, and darkness stretched before them, as if they rode into black velvet. Only this velvet was freezing cold. He reminded himself he’d been in colder places, much colder. Maybe it was the fear within that made the coldness penetrate so deeply. The fear of losing Deborah? That could not, would not happen.

Klint was unusually quiet. Perhaps he was worried, too. Chance longed for the rising of the sun, prayed for it, but it did not materialize. It was as if time stood still. He’d almost given up hope

when the thin rays of the morning's light shone directly ahead of them.

But it did not cheer him for it showed they were heading in the wrong direction.

Chapter Thirty-three

Deborah had watched Chance ride away into the dark. For a moment, numbness kept her confined to the spot. No not numbness. Numbness would have been preferable to the pain that racked her body. Her very being ached with an emotion she could not name.

Klint, after speaking softly to Fritz, had followed Chance. When the sounds of the horses' hooves faded away, she moved back toward the campfire, although the wood had burned down and offered little warmth. She did not sit but remained standing.

Fritz retrieved the small spade from his saddle and threw dirt over the embers, snuffing out the last bit of light. She had no knowledge of how much time elapsed before she realized she shivered with cold.

"We're going to freeze," she said, to her brother's back.

His stiffened stance radiated his anger. Toward her? For kissing Chance? Anger welled up within her aimed back at him. Why had he been so unwilling to ride away with Chance and Klint? Emotions poured forth from her as if a dam had broken, overwhelming, soaring, circling, tightening the muscles in her chest, making it difficult to breathe.

When she spoke, her voice was but a croak. "We need to go after them."

When Fritz did not respond, she made her way to her bedroll and climbed in, pulling the blankets tight before releasing one arm to pull the canvas above her chin. She wrapped her arms around her, not only as protection from the cold, but to keep the anger from spilling out. She'd never been so furious in her life, not even when she'd discovered her brothers had robbed the Brokken Bank.

She breathed deeply and tried to remember Isaac's teachings. There were a lot of verses in the Bible about anger, and with her penchant for impertinence, as her grandmother called it, she'd memorized many of them, mostly against her will. She searched her mind for an appropriate verse, and the only one that came to mind was from Ecclesiastes. "Be not hasty in thy spirit to be angry: for anger resteth in the bosom of fools."

And she was a little angry at Chance. He had abandoned her,

left her. No one else had seen anything, even after they searched. He should have stayed, or she should have gone with him. No, she couldn't have gone, not after that kiss. She touched her lips. He'd never kissed her with such... passion.

For him to kiss her like that, in front of Fritz and Klint, even if it had been dark, was scandalous. Her cheeks burned, and her breathing became ragged as she remembered the feel of him against her.

Her feelings for him were too strong, too strong to be alone with him. She closed her eyes tightly. He said he'd be back tomorrow. Couldn't she bear to be apart from him for only one day—less than a day, more than likely?

Maybe she should have gone instead of lying there in misery. Marriage was simply a commitment, and she was committed to him, mind and soul. They should have thought before leaving Brokken and had Preacher Grisson marry them.

If they were married, she could be with him instead of being left behind with Fritz. But her brother needed her, not only because of Karl and Curt, but for comfort. He'd left Lydia behind and was heartbroken. She understood, now, more than ever.

She opened her eyes and peered in the direction she'd last seen her brother. By the dim light of the stars, she made out his form. He sat near the darkened campfire, his shoulders hunched. He propped on something ... his rifle. Maybe he did believe Chance and had decided to keep watch.

She closed her eyes again, able to relax her stiff muscles. Her worries eased, and she tried to sleep, but the ground was uncomfortable. Tiny rocks poked in her back. She rolled to her side and finally dozed.

It seemed only a few minutes had passed when a hand shook her awake. She startled and sat upright, confused for a moment, until Fritz's face came into view.

"What?" she managed to say before he pressed the back of his hand against her mouth.

"We're leaving."

She took the cue from his soft whisper and nodded, not sure if he could see her. It was darker than it had been when she'd dozed off. Without making a sound, she rose and rolled up her bedroll.

Fritz already had their horses saddled. It wasn't until they ridden far away from the camp that he spoke. "Chance was right.

Someone was at our camp."

"Did you see who it was?"

He shook his head. "I'll be glad when the sun comes up. No moon and the clouds are blocking out the stars."

They rode on in silence. The hair on Deborah's neck stood on end, and the prickling continued down her back. Someone might be following them, watching from behind, and it was too dark to know.

Her face burned in the cold wind, distracting her. To be riding in the darkness, in December, in the coldest part of the night, was not all bad. The discomfort distracted her from worry. All she could think of was getting out of the cold. She hunched forward, close to the horse's neck, for a bit more warmth.

Deborah was half frozen when the graying of the day arrived. The cold did not dispel, even when the sun made an appearance. Its thin rays wavered in the frigid air, as if the cold was too much for even it. This was the coldest Deborah had ever been in her life, although she'd never been out riding at night in the middle of December.

Fritz pulled his horse to a stop, and Deborah stopped beside him. He took his hat from his head and wiped his brow, although it was too cold for him to be sweating.

He cast a glance in her direction as he settled his hat back on his head. "We're going back."

"Back? To Brokken?"

"No. To the campsite. I want to see if I can pick up the track of whoever it was spying on us."

"But Karl and Curt ..."

He swung an arm in the air. "We'll never make it to Mexico if we're bushwhacked."

Deborah nodded although she remained uneasy about retracing their steps. The time wasted tracking down a drifter could be used to get them closer to her brothers. *And Chance*, her mind whispered, but she pushed the thought aside. Chance knew where she was. He'd find her if his will was as strong as his want.

Fritz led the way, and Deborah followed. The air did not grow any warmer, and she shivered until Fritz stopped and pulled out his own blanket for her to wrap around her shoulders. Deborah wasn't hungry, but Fritz urged her to eat a few bites and to drink from her canteen before they continued.

They arrived back at the area near the campsite. Fritz did not go directly to where they'd camped but circled around, looking at the ground. Deborah did the same, her gaze sweeping the area, looking for any sign of life. After a few moments, she spotted half a hoofprint and called to Fritz. He swung off his horse and dropped the reins, approaching slowly as he inspected the print, and then he moved farther away.

After a few minutes, as if he was satisfied, he gave a short nod when he returned to Deborah. "Someone else has been here."

"Are you sure it wasn't Klint or Chance's horse?"

"I'm sure. This horse is headed toward Brokken. There are more tracks over here, and someone was leading the horse, walking ahead. It's a small footprint, but whoever it was wore boots."

"What do we do?" She patted her horse's neck and spoke softly to calm her.

"I'm not sure. Follow the tracks seems our best bet." He took his thumb and pushed his hat back to peer up into her face.

"If we follow the tracks, we'll be heading toward the sheriff. And what if it was a scout from her?"

Fritz took off his hat to wipe his forehead again and then settled it back in place, pulled low over his eyes. "I haven't been entirely truthful with you."

She frowned, and it felt as if an invisible hand squeezed her heart. He'd lied. She'd lied. They had all lied. Somehow, she thought the lying was done with. She steeled herself. "What do you mean?" Her voice was as chilly as the air.

"Benito Juárez's men captured father and ..."

Her mind could not comprehend what he said, and she held up a hand to stop his words. "Father died in the War," she said flatly.

"No, Deborah. Our father behaved in a way some might consider dishonorable—he deserted the Confederacy at the eleventh hour. Many Confederate soldiers, afraid of punishment from the Unionists, fled to Mexico at that time, lured there by promises of resettlement by Emperor Maximilian. Father was one of the Confederate officers summoned directly, and he took a stash of weapons with him."

"Father stole weapons?"

Fritz frowned and shook his head. "I wouldn't say that. The War was over. The Unionists would have confiscated the weapons and sold them to President Juárez."

“So, Father is still there, in Mexico?” Her heart beat wildly in her chest at the thought of seeing her father again.

He shook his head slowly, sadly. “No. Maximilian was executed by a firing squad in June of this year.”

Deborah gasped. With all the marriages and her own courtship with Chance, she’d had little time to pay attention to the news. “And what of Father? Why did he keep this secret?”

“He was caught in another war and didn’t know how long he’d be there. He was afraid it would distress you to know he went to Mexico instead of returning home.”

“But for y’all to keep it from me, to tell me he had died in the War…”

Fritz held up a hand. “No one ever said he’d died—it was an assumption you made. We never corrected that assumption.”

Deborah digested what he had told her. “And where is he now?”

“He was imprisoned… I do not wish to distress you.” His forehead creased, and he looked away.

“No, please continue. No more lies.” She pulled the blanket tighter around her.

His voice broke when he spoke, and his face remained averted. “Father was tortured. Juárez’s men knew he had sold weapons to Maximilian and wanted the gold he’d been paid.”

“Why?” But as she asked the question, she knew. “Father had hidden it? And they were trying to find out where?”

“No, not Father. Karl. Karl had been in Father’s regiment and went with him to Mexico but didn’t stay. Karl returned to Brokken alone, with the gold.”

Fear choked her, and she could only nod for him to continue.

“As I said, Juárez’s men tortured Father until he told them—I’m not sure what. We knew of this, had contacts from Maximilian’s men who had not been captured—well, Karl did. I tried to stay out of the whole affair, until one day, an emissary from Juárez came into the bank. We had to make a decision, and so we did. We traveled to Mexico with the emissary.”

“One of Juárez’s men came to Brokken?” Her head swirled with this information.

Fritz’s shoulders slumped. “Yes, but we had already hidden the gold. We were afraid they’d simply take the gold and kill us if we arrived with it. When we tried to negotiate, they demanded more than double what we had hidden—even with the money from the

town, it was not enough. They kept Curt and Karl as hostages and sent me to Brokken for the gold they demanded."

"What happened to Father?"

"He had already died from the torture." He passed a hand over his eyes and reached blindly for his sister's hand. She leaned to the side to take it.

After a moment, Fritz spoke again. "So, you see, the man who was here could have been one of Juárez's men."

Deborah's heart leapt to her throat. "Here? This close to Brokken."

Fritz shrugged. "I didn't think they would follow me but maybe they did."

Her heart drummed in her chest. Deborah shivered, more from the thought of the men who had killed her father than the cold. "Isn't that all the more reason we need to find Klint and Chance first? What if it's more than one man?"

Fritz nodded, his eyes unfocused, as if lost in thought. He released her hand and moved away to search a few more moments before mounting and pulling his horse alongside of hers.

"I'm unsure of the best course of action." Lines of puzzlement crossed his forehead.

"How many men do you think may have followed you?" she asked.

"I don't know. Surely only a few, but I don't understand why they would." He shrugged.

"Perhaps they thought you would not return with the gold. Shouldn't we be going?" Her voice sounded very prim as if her brother had become a stranger. He had. All three of her brothers and even her father, God rest his soul. They'd kept her father's whereabouts a secret, planned a course of action, carried it out, and had never confided in her.

Fritz frowned at her. "In which direction do you think?"

Fritz seemed incapable of making a decision. She puckered her brow, resentful for a moment. She should not have this burden thrust upon her.

How could she turn away from Chance, the man she loved, when he waited for her? But what if this man was scouting for Juárez's men? Or for the Andrews Gang? She sighed deeply. "We'll follow the man's tracks and find out who he is. Do you agree?"

"Yes, that is the course of action I would suggest."

“But I have one more question…”

“What?”

“When you stole the town’s money…”

Fritz held up a hand, grinned, and for a minute, looked like the young brother who’d gone off to War. “That’s just it. We didn’t.”

Chapter Thirty-four

Chance and Klint arrived back to the camp after mid-day. The clouds had obscured the sun all day, although it had yet to rain. As cold as it was, Chance would not have been surprised to see snowflakes.

They dismounted and left the horses near a clump of trees and approached the place they'd left last night. Only last night? The hours of misery made it seem much longer. The ashes were cold, although that was not a surprise.

"What are you searching for? Don't you believe Fritz and Deborah kept to the original plan and headed south? We should be able to catch them if we push the horses," Klint said.

"We're here. We may as well have a look around." As much as he wanted to race off in search of Deborah, Chance had to consider all possibilities.

He did not confide in Klint his doubts that had grown as they rode back toward the camp. He'd almost convinced himself that the person he'd seen had not been a person at all, but a cougar. It had only been a perception, nothing more than a shimmer, a shadow, that had flitted across his line of sight.

But if it had been a person... He could not bear to think what might have happened after he'd galloped away. As much as he disliked Fritz, though, the man was perfectly capable of defending himself and Deborah. Worry should not gnaw him so.

He searched carefully until he found something, a partial hoofprint. Other prints were visible and immediately recognizable as belonging to Deb and Fritz's horses. Each horse had shoes of different sizes, different imperfections, easily identifiable if one knew what to look for.

He called Klint over, and they followed the prints farther from camp, noting the direction Deborah and her brother had taken—north, toward Brokken.

Klint frowned at him. "Why would they head that way? They're going straight toward the sheriff."

"Your guess is as good as mine. But it looks as if they were on the man's trail."

“But why? I see two other choices for our mysterious visitor, besides Juárez’s man or a member of the Andrews Gang. It could be someone Vic, I mean Sheriff Vic, sent looking for us or maybe a drifter. Going back is too dangerous. We’re trying to get away from the sheriff, not ride to meet her.”

Klint was right. It didn’t make sense. Unless Fritz knew more than he was telling. He shrugged. “The question before us is what action should we pursue? If it was the sheriff’s man, we’d be riding to meet her and her posse. We need to decide if we want to follow Deb and Fritz.” But Chance had already made up his mind.

“That’s not a viable option if you want my opinion,” Klint said.

The answer gave him some comfort—Klint cared more for his own skin than he did for Deborah. He cast Klint a sideways glance. “So, let Fritz and his sister face the sheriff alone?”

“I suppose we must consider your sweetheart and her brother, after all we’ve been through. We can’t leave them hanging out to dry.” Despite his solemn words, Klint’s eyes sparkled.

Chance frowned at him, remembering the first time he’d seen Klint, on the train, sitting across from Deborah who had seemed attracted to him.

Chance cocked his head. Never had he caught Klint in a bad mood. Surely, any woman in her right mind would prefer someone with a pleasant demeanor—not someone like him who often found it difficult to smile at a joke, much less laugh.

But it seemed Deborah accepted Chance as he was—at least for now. Marriage, children, would bring a new set of challenges. Eventually, she’d tire of his sullen ways, and what then? He desired to change, longed to please Deborah. He pushed his hat back to get a closer look at the man who was his rival, if only in his own mind. “What’s your secret, Klint?”

Klint’s eyebrows rose. “What secret?”

“Nothing seems to bother you.”

Klint’s blue eyes narrowed, became serious. “Have you heard of Epictetus?”

“The Greek philosopher?” Chance hadn’t had much schooling, but he loved to read, had read during the War since he found himself alone most of the time.

“Yes. His teachings were to accept whatever happens with calm, to not kick against the pricks.”

Chance frowned. “Kick against the pricks? That’s from the Bible,

isn't it?"

"Yes, but it was also a Greek proverb. Kicking against the pricks gets you nowhere. Circumstances we cannot change, we must accept. Otherwise, we get stuck and can't move forward. We'd be like a blind hog. We might find an acorn once in a while, but only by accident."

For a moment, Chance contemplated Klint's words and then snorted. "Greek philosophy, Bible verses, and cowboy sayings. Quite a collection you got there."

Klint laughed, and for a moment, Chance forgot his envy of this man. It was true Klint flirted with Deborah, but that was his way, his nature. Deborah paid little heed to Klint, at least, as far as Chance knew.

Klint laughed until tears streamed down his face. He wiped them away with the back of his hand. "I was the son of a plantation owner and had a..." His face drew serious although the corners of his mouth tilted up as if he wanted to smile. "... a classical education."

"Oh?" Chance had never been curious about Klint, too caught up in his own problems, and when he'd come to terms with that, too caught up with Deborah. His heart constricted. He had to find her, as quickly as possible. "We need to get going."

"Daylight's wasting," Klint agreed. "But listen. I learned a bit of Latin, a phrase—*Amor fati*. It means love fate, whatever happens, no matter how bad. And that leads me to a request."

Chance's mouth gaped open, and he snapped it shut. How could anyone love the bad that befell them?

Chance was done talking and replied irritably. "What?"

"Let's eat lunch. Get your rifle and shoot us a rabbit."

Chance gritted his teeth. "I am not touching the rifle."

He'd yet to break the vow, made the day the War ended. He'd sold his rifle, as soon as he could, and had never touched another.

Klint's face remained calm. "Accept what happened to you. Everything happens for a reason."

"Nope. I'm kicking. Maybe I need to let the pricks pierce deeper, torment me for all I've done. It's what I deserve." Tears stung the back of his eyes, and he turned away to blink and swallow.

Klint ignored his words. "At least hold the rifle and walk with me into the woods over there. I'll get our dinner if you can't."

Chance hesitated. Klint didn't wait for his answer but pulled the

rifle from Chance's scabbard and thrust it into Chance's unwilling arms, pressing it against him.

Chance struggled against Klint for a moment and then sighed. It wasn't worth it. Carrying the rifle didn't mean anything. "I'll carry it, but I'm not shooting anything."

"Fine." Klint headed for the woods, his rifle held loosely in one hand.

After a moment, Chance did the same, and surprisingly, the rifle felt right, comforting in his hand, as he followed after Klint. A chilled wind blew, and the dried leaves, not yet fallen from the trees, although browned and withered, made a shushing sound, as if warning them to tread quietly. In but a few minutes, Klint shot a rabbit. Chance's sharp eyes had seen it before Klint although he had not raised the rifle nor even tightened his hand.

He'd been carrying a rifle since a young'un, since his brother had taught him to hunt, the very brother he'd shot in the War.

He marched back to his horse and shoved the rifle into the scabbard with such force, the horse spooked. He said a few calming words. By the time he turned around, Klint already had a fire going and was skinning the rabbit.

Klint grinned at him. "Good thing the sheriff didn't know about your aversion to the rifle, or she would never have believed your story about us hunting quail."

"She did know, and she didn't believe me, did she?" He'd lied for nothing.

Klint shrugged, and his gaze went back to the rabbit, and he continued dressing it, speaking to Chance without looking up. "No, she didn't. You're right."

Chance didn't offer to help. Dressing a rabbit was a one-person job. Instead, he took a seat on a log and fed wood to the fire. He watched the flames shooting up for a moment. "Thank you, Klint."

"For what?"

Chance kept his gaze on the flames. "For trying to help, although you need to quit your interfering. I can't change."

"Do you wish to change?"

"Yes, but it can't, won't happen. It's too late." He shot Klint a glance, to watch his reaction.

Klint snorted and then skewered the rabbit and positioned it above the fire. "You have your whole life ahead of you. What are you? Twenty?"

Chance laughed. “That means I would have gone off to war at fourteen.”

“Many Rebs did. We were short on men by the end, at least.”

“I was seventeen when I joined up, although that was still young. I was still wet behind the ears.”

“A young man of twenty-three. I’m an old man of twenty-six.” Klint sighed deeply. “I’m getting older and older, and marriage appears out of the question for me.”

It was Chance’s turn to laugh. “I’m sure you wouldn’t have a problem finding a wife.”

“You would be wrong. None of the Brokken women are susceptible to my charms.”

Although only a few minutes ago, he’d convinced himself Deborah had no interest in Klint, Chance bristled at the words. “You mean Deborah?”

Klint held up a hand. “Settle down. I mean the women of the town, not the young woman with the surname Brokken.”

Chance had half risen from his seat. He sank back, his anger subsiding to be replaced with embarrassment. “Sorry.”

“It bothers you that I’m friendly with Deborah? That we work together?” Klint tilted his head to peer at him.

Chance didn’t answer. The flames drew his gaze again. He was not going to admit his jealousy to this man. Klint would only lie anyway, if he did plan to woo Deborah away.

“You’re a fool,” Klint said softly.

Maybe he was. But what made him think Deborah could care for him, would remain loyal? Everyone in his life had betrayed him, everyone, including Paul. Why had Paul joined the Confederacy? He’d put himself in danger, put himself in Chance’s line of fire.

Still, it was his fault. War was hell and to redeem himself from his crime was an impossibility.

“Eat up,” Klint commanded. “We need to get going.”

But Chance had lost his appetite. Love was hell, too.

Chapter Thirty-five

Deborah kept casting a glance back over her shoulder. She wasn't sure if it was because she was still spooked or if she hoped to see Chance. Perhaps both.

Fritz led the way, stopping every now and then to check the tracks. So far, they'd only seen one set. Were they wasting their time, precious time for Curt and Karl? Not just wasting time but heading toward the sheriff. Fritz wouldn't be thrown in the jail if they were caught, but under it. She didn't dare contemplate what might happen to her.

No matter. Being separated from Chance would be more punishment than she could bear. Fritz stopped in front of her, so suddenly, she had to jerk back the reins of her horse sharply. When she brought her horse under control, she looked in the direction he stared, behind her on the path.

Her relief was so profound, her breath released in an audible swoosh. Klint and Chance rode to them as Deborah and Fritz reined their horses around to face them. Klint had his usual grin, but it was Chance who drew her gaze. She was afraid he'd be angry she'd not gone with him. Instead, a grin, almost as big as Klint's, split his face. She drank in the sight of him hungrily. She was vaguely aware Fritz sent her an annoyed look.

Klint put his gloved hands to his saddle horn and leaned toward them with a creak of his saddle. "What are y'all doing? Heading back to Brokken?"

Fritz leaned forward also and spoke quietly. "I got to thinking the print could belong to one of Juárez's men."

Chance pulled his gaze from her to look at her brother. "Why would they come this far north, venture this far into Texas? More likely one of the Andrews Gang."

Fritz shrugged his shoulders and glanced away. "Maybe," he said, the reluctance evident in his voice. "But, I'm more inclined to believe it was one of Juárez's men. In January, one of them came into the bank, demanding gold."

"I take it you did not tell the sheriff?" Chance shifted in his saddle.

Fritz straightened his shoulders and glanced from one of the men to the other. “No, but it’s too late for regrets. When I left Brokken with my brothers, most of the men of the town were gone. Those left behind were too old or too young to do much.”

Deborah bristled at his words. “Maybe it was mostly ladies left in town, but you had no right to count us out—more than one of us can wield a gun.”

Fritz barely flicked his eyes toward her. “Still, I thought it best to keep the knowledge private. Why send everyone into a panic if we could handle it ourselves?”

Deborah frowned at him. “Because that’s what neighbors and family do. We help one another.”

Her brother sighed deeply. “Klint, come with me, and we’ll scout ahead. Chance, stay with Deborah until we return.”

Without another word, her brother turned his horse toward Brokken, and Klint followed.

Deborah and Chance dismounted, both watching until the two disappeared. The road had narrowed, barely a path. They moved off, into a more open area and dropped the reins. Deborah tucked her head down, shame burning her cheeks. Her brother had behaved abominably, even now. What must Chance think of her family? He touched her arm, and she glanced up at him through her lashes.

To her surprise, he, too, appeared embarrassed. He cleared his throat. “I’m sorry.”

“Whatever for?” She tilted her head back and widened her eyes.

“For leaving you. I never should have ridden away.” The warmth in his eyes sent shivers down her spine.

She searched his eyes, to be sure he was sincere. “No, it was my fault. I should have gone with you, not stayed with Fritz.”

A lopsided grin appeared on his face. “Isn’t it improper for a young lady to travel with two single men?”

She laughed. “I think breaking my brother and you two out of jail was a greater sin.”

He stepped closer, and her heart beat wildly in her chest. She should have retreated, but she stayed her ground. He took her hand and simply held it between them for a moment. She still wore her gloves, as did he. She desired to feel his skin against hers and pulled her hand free from his to peel off her glove. She placed her palm against his face and then traced the length of his jaw.

He caught her wrist and pulled it away, pulled her closer, to brush his lips over hers. This was not the intense kiss from the night before, but feather soft, and despite the softness, or because of it, a raging desire grew within her. She wrapped her arms around his neck and pulled his head closer, for a deeper kiss.

He groaned and pulled out of her hold to bend his head to her ear. His breath was as light as a puff of wind, one that carried her away, beyond the cold and the worry that had beleaguered them.

He spoke softly. “How long do you think your brother and Klint will be gone?”

His words brought her to her senses. She pressed her palms against his chest, and he stepped back.

She frowned at him. “What are you suggesting Chance Hale?”

He threw his hands in the air in a gesture of surrender. “Nothing. It seems we’re wasting a lot of time, standing around, doing nothing.”

She narrowed her eyes and studied him. His face was all innocence, not embarrassed at all, although his eyes smoldered. Of course, it was she who should feel embarrassed. She pulled her glove back on and nibbled her bottom lip.

Chance watched her with his intense pale gray eyes, the irises circled with dark blue. The warmth inside her became a fire, as if dry kindling had been thrown on flames. She resisted the pull and forced her gaze away.

Klint and Fritz could be back any moment.

Heat rose to her cheeks, and even the cold air failed to cool them. No, she should not be alone with this man, not until they were safely married. She grabbed her horse’s reins and walked closer to the path to peer down it in the direction Fritz and Klint had ridden. Her knees felt weak, and dizziness assailed her.

Chance came up beside her, and they stood shoulder to shoulder. He did not look in her direction, and she did not look toward him. Her breathing was too rapid, and she concentrated on slowing it down. It was difficult, no, impossible, with Chance standing so close. She moved to the other side of her horse to put distance between them. She leaned against the horse, drawing strength from the animal, and slowly, her legs grew stronger.

Some more minutes, a half hour or more, dragged by. Chance moved closer and squinted at the sun. “It’ll be dark soon. We need to find a place to bed down.”

Deborah bit her lip and looked away.

Chance let out an impatient sigh. “Deborah, you can be twenty feet away. Forty if that will make you feel better.”

“Alone? Out here?” Her eyes widened.

“Not alone. Twenty feet away, and I can reach you in a second.”

Maybe he could, but to be in the dark, in the cold, was not something she wanted. “We’d better stay together.”

“Whatever you’d like. I plan to stay awake and keep watch.”

“You need your rest. You didn’t get any sleep last night. I’ll keep watch.”

“We’ll take turns.”

She nodded, and they moved down the trail a little, looking for a better clearing.

“We don’t want to go too far,” Chance cautioned. “We might miss Klint and Fritz otherwise.”

She nodded again.

Chance stopped and indicated an area next to the path. “This should do.”

Chance hobbled the horses not far from them while Deborah removed the largest rocks and pebbles and laid out the bedrolls. Chance brought back pemmican and their canteens, and they ate their supper.

“I’ll take first watch,” she told Chance. Coyotes yipped in the distance, their sound comforting, not distressing.

He nodded and climbed into his bedroll. In only minutes, he slept, not surprising with how tired he must be. But it hurt a little that he did not lie awake and think of her. She stifled a giggle and yawned.

The night was going to be a long one.

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FRITZ SHOOK DEBORAH awake. She sat up startled and gasped. She’d never woken Chance, but when she glanced to his bedroll, he was not there, and neither was his bedroll.

Fritz motioned to her. “We must hurry.”

She staggered to her feet and attempted to smooth her hair.

Fritz appeared haggard, and even Klint was serious.

Deborah waved impatiently. “What did you find out?”

Fritz looked toward the ground. “It wasn’t Juárez’s men.”

“You mean it was someone the sheriff sent?”

Klint cocked his head. “That would be a relief. No, it’s the Andrews Gang.”

Her heart caught in her throat, and she put a hand to relieve the pressure. “They must have got wind of the gold.”

“And a strange thing. A man was there—looked like the men deferred to him. I didn’t get a close look, but he moved and looked a lot like Jonathan English.” Fritz’s lips pressed together to form a thin line.

Deborah frowned. “Sheriff Vic’s husband? He was killed in the War.”

“I didn’t get a close look, but they sure favor. And another thing—I’m sure they have Curt and Karl with them—leastwise, two men trussed up like Christmas geese,” Fritz said, his eyes distressed.

Deborah gasped. “But why would they have Curt and Karl?”

“No time for all this talk,” Klint said. “We have to get going.”

Chance walked up with the horses saddled and looked from one man to the other. “I heard y’all talking. The Andrews Gang? I will not go after them.” His words were flat but defiant.

Fritz frowned. “Klint and I, if you’re too much of a coward.”

Chance showed no anger at his words but stepped closer. “How many men did you see?”

Klint answered. “We counted twenty-two. Could be more.”

Deborah’s eyes widened, and Fritz turned to her, his face calm and composed. “We can handle them.”

She gave a quick nod, his words calming her, steadying her. “Good.”

Klint shook his head. “It’s not going to be that easy. It’s tricky with your brothers in their midst.”

Chance gave a nod to Klint. “Exactly. What are your plans, Fritz?”

“The same as always. We have our rifles, and we’ll use them.” His gaze met Chance’s and held it.

“Their guns outnumber ours by a wide margin.” Chance narrowed his eyes, and a muscle in his jaw twitched.

Deborah shot Fritz a sharp look. “Someone has to ride into Brokken, to warn the people, if that’s where they’re heading.”

Fritz turned to her. “Of course. You do that, and we’ll go after the men.”

Klint shook his head. “They’re camped in that open area, above the lake.”

“North of town?” Chance asked.

Klint nodded at him. “Yes. Now, listen. We need your rifle.”

Surely, Chance would agree, but he already shook his head.

He snorted his disgust. “You just said they were in an open area. The nearest trees are too short to climb. You can’t get close enough for a good shot. What would a rifle do in that situation?”

Fritz moved aggressively toward Chance who did not give ground. “What are you saying? Abandon my brothers?”

Klint placed a hand on Fritz’s shoulder, as if to hold him back. “We need to think this through. We can’t go marching up like pigs for slaughter.”

Fritz frowned. “I did not imply that. We’ll formulate a plan when we get to their camp.”

Chance glared at him and inched closer. “You don’t even have a plan?”

Klint held up a hand, palm toward them. “Hold on. I have an idea.”

“What?” Fritz’s gaze remained locked with Chance’s.

They were both pigheaded. Deborah moved between the two men. “Listen to Klint. He’s the only one with sense around here.”

Her words were sharper than intended but had an effect. Both Chance and Fritz turned away from each other, although both still scowled.

Klint nodded his thanks to Deborah before he spoke. “Each of us will cover one of the roads into town. As far as we know, they haven’t ventured in—not from what we could tell. The sun’s barely up, and we may have time to stop them, if they head toward the town. I’ll take North Main, Fritz, you take South, and Chance can take East Street.”

Deborah held up a hand, as if a school girl. “Someone has to cover West Street. I’ll take it.”

Fritz shook his head. “Too dangerous.”

Deborah snorted. “You said they were north of town. I doubt seriously they’ll enter town on the road where the sheriff’s office sits.”

Fritz expression became solemn. “You underestimate them.”

Chance shook his head, placed his hands on his hips, and widened his stance. “You can count me out. I’m not covering East Street.”

Deborah faced him and frowned. “Not even to save my

brothers?"

Chance surveyed her coolly. "We don't know what the gang plans. We don't even know for sure if they have your brothers. Besides, I signed up to help break them out of a Mexican prison, not to take on the Andrews Gang. The smart thing is to go after the sheriff and bring her and the posse back. They can handle this better than we can."

Fritz spoke before she had a chance. "No. We have to act now. The location may be here instead of Mexico, but we still have a job to do."

Deborah placed a hand on Chance's arm and searched his face. She needed to make him understand. "My father sold guns to Emperor Maximilian and was paid in gold. Karl hid it somewhere, and maybe these men, the Andrews Gang, heard about it, broke Curt and Karl out, to find the location. What else would they be doing with my brothers?"

"Fritz couldn't tell who it was," Chance said.

"It's them. I'd stake my life on it," Fritz shot back.

Chance walked away a few steps and then back, his agitation evident in every step, coming to a stop in front of her brother. "Where is the gold, Fritz?"

Her brother's eyes went flat, and he shook his head. "Your guess is as good as mine. You all saw where it was last, under the flat rock. I'm sure Lydia led the sheriff to it—maybe they still have it in their possession."

Klint made a sound, half cough and half snort and cleared his throat. "Fritz, you told us that was the town's gold."

Deborah's mouth gaped open, and she shot a sideways glance to Chance, who had gone very still, before turning her attention back to her brother.

Fritz's eyes became hooded. "I lied so Lydia would tell the sheriff. The gold needed moving. If Curt and Karl were killed, at least Juárez's men would not get the gold."

Chance pushed past Klint and grabbed Fritz's arm. "You, fool. You've put the sheriff and Lydia's lives in danger."

Fritz jerked away. "I didn't know those men would come here, to Brokken."

Deborah's heart sank. "If they don't find the hidden money, they'll probably rob the bank. There's a bit of money there."

Fritz shrugged. "More than a bit."

“What do you mean?” Deborah asked.

Fritz lips curled, in a semblance of a smile. “I’ve already told you we did not rob the bank. The town’s money is still there—in the bank.”

Chapter Thirty-six

Chance was disgusted with Fritz and his lying. For a moment, he considered mounting his horse and riding away. If it had not been for Deborah, he would have.

She had taken her brother by his arm, shaking her head slightly. “You’re mistaken. I’ve had the bank opened for months. The money is not there.”

Fritz tilted his head, the corners of his mouth twitching as if he tried not to smile. “Did you get the marmalade we left for you?”

A puzzled frown appeared on her brow. “Yes. Sheriff Vic gave it to me.”

Deborah had told Chance how much that small gesture had meant, how she’d been thinking of Christmas and the gifts of oranges from her father. And even though her brothers had robbed the bank, they’d at least left her a reminder of happier times—a jar of orange marmalade.

Fritz allowed the smile to fully form. “I take it you didn’t open the jar?”

Deborah’s cheeks turned a pleasing color of pink. “I had every intention to, that very day. I was going home to make biscuits for the Jennings brothers and share the marmalade with them, but I got sentimental, thinking I’d never see y’all again, and the marmalade would be all I had to remember you by. I put that jar away in my room and used a jar of preserves Grandmother had to feed the Jennings.”

Fritz shook his head. “We were counting on you to open it. At least, eventually. It’s where we hid the gold coins.”

“Oh.” Her mouth rounded before her brows she drew together. “But that was one small jar.”

“The money was converted to gold, and how many jars of marmalade do we keep at the bank?”

Deborah’s eyes widened. “You mean you put gold in all the jars of marmalade, the marmalade you keep in the back? All of those jars have gold coins?”

Neither Fritz or Deborah looked in his direction when Chance snorted. He kicked at the ground, and Klint exchanged a look with

him, shaking his head.

Fritz laughed harshly, and then his expression softened toward his sister. “I guess when you reopened the bank you didn’t treat the customers as we did.”

Deborah shook her head. “No. I never set out the marmalade nor bought baked goods from Molly. It’s taken me a while to learn the business and to get out of the red. But I don’t understand. Why hide the money in jars?”

Fritz took off his hat and ran his fingers through his hair. “We couldn’t leave gold lying around, and we had no one to trust.”

Deborah raised her brows, and her spine stiffened. “I beg your pardon.”

Fritz at least had the decency to appear contrite. “I’m sorry, Deb. You’ve always been our kid sister. We didn’t notice you’d grown up and were capable of taking over the business.”

Chance narrowed his eyes at the man whom Deborah still evidently cared about. Her brothers had not had the sense to see her true worth.

Deborah’s face smoothed. “I don’t like it, but I understand.”

Fritz swung an arm in the air, as if he could erase all his mistakes. “Besides, we thought we’d be back inside two weeks, and we left enough money to cover that time. Our plan was to negotiate the price with the emissary, give them the gold and be done with it. We never expected to be thrown into prison.” His expression became soft, and he blinked away tears.

Unexpectedly, Chance was affected. Why he felt sorry for Fritz, he didn’t know. He cleared his throat. “You must have thought there was a possibility you’d never return and figured someone was bound to open a jar and discover the gold.”

“No one thinks they’re going to be imprisoned, perhaps killed.” Fritz’s face cleared, and he shrugged as if it was a minor manner.

Chance nodded. He didn’t know all Fritz had been through, could only imagine what the Mexican prison had been like, and he wasn’t going to press further.

“Speaking of which,” Klint said. “We’ve got to solidify a plan.”

“Why not simply give them what they want? Maybe they’ll go and leave us in peace,” Chance said.

Deborah looked at him as if she didn’t know him. “Are you afraid to fight?”

Chance looked to the ground and scrubbed the toe of his boot in

the dirt. “I’ve seen enough killing to last a lifetime.”

“We all have, and it’s not something to take lightly,” Klint said. His voice held sadness, a wistfulness, Chance had never heard from him.

Klint nodded. “I agree. Deborah needs to ride to the ranches in the area, gather up as many men... er, folks as she can find, bring them into town. I’ll go in to warn the people in town, maybe set up some defenses.”

Chance shook his head. “What if some of the men are already there?”

Deborah spoke. “We can be discreet, check around first.”

Fritz took his thumb and pushed his hat back. “I’ll go back to their camp, watch their movements, before heading to North Main.”

Deborah gave Chance a pleading look before she spoke. “We need more help.”

“I’ll ride for the sheriff,” Chance replied.

Deborah began to speak but snapped her mouth shut and turned away.

Klint looked to him, and when he spoke, his voice, too, pleaded. “We need your help, your rifle, Chance.”

All eyes turned to him, and he met each in turn with a level gaze. This was a decision he’d lived with for years, and he didn’t plan to change his mind. “I’ll ride for the sheriff,” he repeated.

Fritz nodded although the planes of his face hardened. He spoke as if every word pained him. “Let’s get going before it gets any later. And remember, they might already be in town. Tread carefully.”

Deborah mounted her horse without speaking. Chance went to her and looked up. “Deborah...”

“You heard them. We’ve got to get going.” But her face softened when his eyes met hers.

“Be careful.” He wanted to tell her how much he loved her, but his throat constricted.

She urged her horse forward, and he moved out of her way, leaving so much unsaid. She didn’t look back.

Chapter Thirty-seven

Deborah swiped away the tears on her cheeks. Chance refused to help, when they needed him most. She shivered in the cold morning and the fear thrummed her temples.

The Andrews Gang—she'd heard of them. Everyone had.

She had to tamp down the panic and present a calm presence when she spoke to people. No need to set everyone in an uproar. If they all ran around like chickens with their heads chopped off, all would be chaos. As she rode along, she rehearsed what she'd say.

She pulled her horse to a stop at Fenton's Blueberry Farm, slid from her horse, and ran to the door. She took a deep breath, smoothed her clothes, and knocked. Mr. Fenton answered the door, a quizzical expression on his face.

"Mr. Fenton, the Andrews Gang is in nearby. You could be in danger or, if not yourself, our town. Please consider going into Brokken with your sons."

Mr. Fenton stared at her, scratched his head, and squinted. "Miss Brokken?"

"Yes. It's me."

"I heard the sheriff was looking for you."

She'd almost forgotten. She licked her lips. "Yes, sir. That was a misunderstanding. Listen, the gang has been spotted north of town. Please head there and help defend it."

"Sorry, Miss Brokken. Until I hear from the sheriff herself, I plan to stay right here, me and mine."

He moved to close the door, and she put her flat palm against it. "Wait. You have to believe me. The gang kidnapped my brothers, Curt and Karl."

"Your brothers? Last I heard tell, they were in a Mexican prison; that is, if you can believe half of what Mr. Fritz has to say. Missus Walsh told me anyone could tell he's been lying through his teeth. And that lady is pretty sharp when it comes to fettering out such things."

Deborah stamped her foot with impatience. "We need help, and if everyone is murdered, is your conscience going to smite you because your believed that woman's gossip?"

“Gossip? Sounded to me it was the gospel truth.” And before she could react, he’d pulled the door closed, and she heard the bar slide into place.

Great. Everyone already knew about Fritz and his lies, knew the sheriff was looking for them. Mrs. Walsh didn’t waste time letting folks know.

Deborah stood a moment, undecided, and shivered in the cold. Isaac was the only one who would help. Maybe the Jennings would come too. They were mere boys, but boys younger than they had marched off to the War. That would be three more, at least. Better than none.

She ignored the steps, leapt from the porch, and ran to her horse.



KLINT HAD GOTTEN THINGS well organized by the time Deborah reached West Street, already barricaded. She smiled her appreciation as Klint motioned her around.

He face creased in puzzlement as he watched Isaac and the Jennings brothers ride in behind her. “Are they the only ones who would help?”

She raised her shoulders in a gesture of defeat. “Sorry. I tried Mr. Fenton’s place first, and he knew the sheriff was after us. I thought it’d be useless to check any of the other ranches. Talk runs fast and furious in small towns like Brokken.”

“You did what you could,” he said. “I had problems convincing some of the town folks.” When she dismounted, he moved closer and lowered his voice. “I may have had to lie to get them to cooperate.”

Deborah managed a weary smile. “Fritz is rubbing off on you.”

But she wasn’t amused. When was the lying going to stop? She sighed heavily. “Should I go to South Main, set up a barricade there? I take it none of the gang are yet in town.”

“I haven’t had time to search all the buildings. The Jennings can check from here to the saloon.”

“I’ll help.”

“No, you wait on the street and keep a lookout. Isaac can go into the buildings with the Jennings.”

She frowned at the authority in his voice. A couple of days ago, she’d been his boss. A tightness at the corners of his mouth, along

with a hard shine in those sky-blue eyes, persuaded her. She nodded. “All right. How about East Street?”

The street Chance refused to help with, riding after the sheriff instead. She pushed the thought from her mind. She had to focus on the job at hand.

“I sent the butcher, Mr. Maddux, over there with some others. The roads are covered, but we need to hurry.” Klint walked away.

Isaac handed her a rifle. He had his revolvers in a holster strapped around his waist. He took one out to hand to the oldest Jennings boy. “Take good care of that. I want it back in the same shape I’m giving it to you.” Isaac’s demeanor, as always, was calm, serene. “Ready, Miss Deborah?”

She nodded and mounted her horse. It would give her a better view, allowing her to scan the area more easily. She followed Isaac and the boys as the frigid air bit her neck. She loosened her hair, allowing it to cascade down her back. She pulled up the collar of her coat.

The boys and Isaac entered each establishment and returned quickly. Alexander raised an arm each time he reappeared to let her know all was clear.

The boys were wiry and as quick as a rattlesnake striking. The walk took no longer than twenty minutes at most. The train depot was the last building searched.

She dismounted and looked around for something, anything to block the tracks. Rebecca, Lydia’s sister, came out of the livery, her face none too friendly. “What’s going on?”

The last time she’d seen Rebecca was in the Walsh kitchen. Rebecca had grilled Deborah and Lydia endlessly. She was in an even fouler mood now. Who could blame her when Lydia was in trouble because of the Brokkens? Perhaps they could mend their friendship later, but there was no time now.

“Anyone else around?” Deborah asked.

“Jake and Noah joined the posse, went after you and the others.” Rebecca laughed. “The sheriff should have waited here for you. A bad penny always shows up.”

Deborah bit her bottom lip. “Where is Lydia?”

“The sheriff handcuffed her and took her with her.”

Guilt made heat suffuse her cheeks. The Walsh family suffered as much as the Brokkens. “What of your mother?”

“Mother is prostrate in the bed, has been since Lydia and you

broke Fritz, Chance, and Klint out of jail."

"Do you need to tend to her?"

"No. She thinks I'm a nuisance. She keeps asking for Lydia." Rebecca's faced twisted, replaced with a wistful look that softened her features.

"I'm sorry. And your other sister, Hannah Beth? Where is she?"

"She's at the school, helping Miss Edna. She's to be the new school teacher next year. Miss Edna's health has been poorly, and she's decided to retire. Beth has been helping for several months."

"Oh. But she knows about the Andrews Gang, that they are close to town?"

"The Andrews Gang?" A smile played on Rebecca's lips, and she shook her head, a wary look coming into her eyes. "I don't know what you're up to Deborah Brokken."

"I assure you I am telling the truth."

"As you did a couple of days ago? When you sent Isaac to lure us away, so that you could steal the horses?" She scoffed.

Deborah gasped. Rebecca accused them of something worse than breaking out of jail or even robbing a bank. "Have you said that to anyone else?"

Rebecca's stance softened. "No... I'm sorry, Deborah. I don't want to see anyone hang for being a horse thief. And, really, one was your own. I suppose the others Lydia has a share in and letting you borrow them is not a crime." Red stained her cheeks. "I should not have said you stole them."

Deborah needed to take advantage, before Rebecca's guilt was assuaged. "We have to get defenses up. Will you help?"

"Yes, I will."

"Thank you." For a moment, Deborah considered giving Rebecca a hug. She changed her mind, afraid the prickliness would return.

"What can I do?"

Deborah rubbed her temples. "We need something to go across the tracks, to block the road."

"We have the wagon. I'll get the mules hitched."

Deborah nodded. "Or we can push it out? The Jennings boys are here and Isaac."

"That would probably be easier."

"Let me get some help." Deborah moved away, her head downcast.

They'd made a mess of things and an even bigger mess was to

come. And all of it was because of the Brokkens. She stopped for a moment, to allow the sorrow to flow through her. Yes, they'd made mistakes, lied, got others involved—Lydia, Chance, and Klint—made the sheriff look foolish, and threw the whole town in a panic when their money, entrusted to the Brokken Bank disappeared. And brought sorrow to the entire Walsh family.

She shook her head sadly. When all of this was over, if they didn't all wind up behind bars, she probably needed to pack and head to Boston with her grandparents. How would she ever hold her head up in this town again?

Chance had ridden away, to find the sheriff, when he should have stayed beside her, stayed even if their chances were slim against the Andrews Gang.

She gritted her teeth. She could wallow in misery after this was over. Right now, she had to try to save the town, the town her father founded. Tears pricked her eyes at the thought of her father.

What was wrong with her? Her body ached with loss and sorrow while her sympathetic feet remained rooted to the spot.

Chance held her heart, but with trust destroyed, how long before their love followed? She took a deep breath, as if about to plunge in an icy lake, like that time in early January when she was eleven and jumped into the pond at the shooting house, on a dare from Fritz.

She was still brave and would face what was ahead, with or without Chance. She could do nothing to summon his presence. Instead, she had to prepare to fight the Andrews Gang who descended on their town.

Finally, her feet moved, and she hurried away to find Isaac and the boys.

Chapter Thirty-eight

Chance fiddled with the horse's reins after Deborah had ridden away. What must she think of him? He went to the saddle, where the scabbard was, and pulled the rifle out, feeling the weight of it in his hands. Sheriff Vic had told him to quit hiding behind his hat, to accept who he was, a hero. Did that mean accepting the rifle, too?

He didn't feel like a hero. To climb high into a tree, take aim at unsuspecting men, and shoot them had brought him only misery. Yes, the sharpshooters had shortened the War, he'd been told, saved lives on both sides, but it seemed a cowardly way to fight.

Why had he ever done it?

It'd been a game, at first. They'd gone off to War, thinking it'd last a few short months. Heck, that first battle, folks came out to picnic, to watch them fight. It was a picnic seared on their minds forever, he was sure.

War was not a game. He'd been young, wet behind the ears, eager to prove his worth. And he had. The other men recognized his skills, congratulated him, gave him accolades. And he'd willingly accepted them. Until he'd shot his own brother.

To tell the truth, he had few memories of what happened after that. He'd not put the rifle down but had continued the shooting, going through the motions he'd already learned so well.

The wind was cold on his neck, and he pulled up the collar of his coat and leaned against his horse. He'd continued for one reason. He had wanted to die. How could he live when his brother's life had been snuffed out? When he could never return home to face his family after what he had done.

He'd wanted death so badly, he could taste it, taste it like as strong as the taste of blood, that time when the Reb had smashed him in the mouth with the butt of his rifle.

That day, he'd snuck behind Rebel lines and found himself in a tree, and somehow had missed the Rebel sharpshooter sitting on the limb above him. Didn't see him until he'd climbed right up beside him. Somehow, the Reb had missed him, too.

Not that it was surprising.

Chance had a way of moving, silently, stealthily. Many a time

growing up he'd startled his mother when he went into the kitchen to sneak a biscuit. God had given him that skill. He'd been born with a slow, deliberate way of moving that barely caused the smallest of tree limbs to move when he climbed a tree.

It was a good hunting skill to have, even when the prey was his fellow man. He gave a wry smile as a tightness entered his chest and twisted inside him. He turned so that his back was to the horse. He still held the rifle and lifted it to his shoulder, remembering the feel, before lowering it.

Chance had taken off his greatcoat to climb the tree, that day. The Reb perched on a frail branch, looking like a bird about to fly away. The man's dark brown eyes widened when it dawned on him whom he was looking at.

By that time of the War, even the members of the Confederacy knew him. His image had been passed around from hand to hand, and a bounty put on his head. Chance was easily recognizable by his gray eyes, not entirely gray but marked with a circle of navy blue around the irises. Maybe God had marked Chance, the way he'd marked Cain, so folks would recognize him for what he was.

The Reb had gone slack jaw and then smiled in recognition. Funny what the man had said. "I admire your work," as if Chance had been an artist, a painter. And then the Red had come up with the stock of his gun, smashing Chance in the mouth. The blood pooled, and Chance spit a glob, even as he lost his balance and crashed backwards. But God, or the Devil, had been with him.

When he fell back, his suspenders caught on a limb. Right then and there, he'd recited Psalm 139—"If I take the wings of the morning, and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea; Even there shall thy hand lead me, and thy right hand shall hold me."

And by the time, he'd righted himself, his knife drawn, the Reb had scrambled down the tree. Chance didn't draw a bead on him but allowed him to scurry away.

With the pain of a busted chin and lip, Chance did his duty. He marked a man at the cannon, his original target, and shot, long before the Reb sharpshooter ever made it back to warn him.

Even now, Chance laughed bitterly at what followed. The Reb embellished the story of their meeting and turned Chance into a legend, if he'd not been one before. But if the Reb hadn't run off scared, he would have seen the damage he'd inflicted, would have finished him off easily, given Chance the death he'd longed for.

Instead, Chance had done his job, climbed down the tree, retrieved his green greatcoat, and stumbled back to camp, dizzy from blood loss. He had needed ten stitches. Not only was his chin split open, but his upper lip, clean up to his nose. The surgeon had been skilled, or perhaps had taken special care because of Chance's reputation.

Chance touched the barely perceptible scars now and thought of why he'd recited the psalm when the Reb had smacked him. Surprisingly, his words had been clear and loud, even though he'd had a mouthful of blood.

Chance, by that time, had long since quit believing in God, after seeing all the gore and destruction, seeing men with limbs sawed off, who'd never be able to make a living again, if they did survive the War. All that blood and gore, and where was God?

And yet, after being smashed in the mouth, he'd recited the psalm. He frowned and wondered why it stuck in his mind. He ran his hand along the barrel of the rifle and recited it now to see if saying the words would offer a clue.

O lord, thou hast searched me, and known me.

Thou knowest my downsitting and mine uprising, thou understandest my thought afar off.

Thou compassest my path and my lying down, and art acquainted with all my ways.

For there is not a word in my tongue, but, lo, O Lord, thou knowest it altogether.

Thou hast beset me behind and before, and laid thine hand upon me.

Inexplicably, tears came to his eyes, ran down his cheeks. He found himself on his knees, sobbing, as he'd done that day with Isaac. He struggled to his feet, gripping the rifle, and repeated a part of the psalm he'd never paid attention to before.

Surely thou wilt slay the wicked, O God: depart from me therefore, ye bloody men.

For they speak against thee wickedly, and thine enemies take thy name in vain.

Do not I hate them, O Lord, that hate thee? and am not I grieved with those that rise up against thee?

I hate them with perfect hatred: I count them mine enemies.

Everyone knew of the Andrews Gang, and the atrocities they'd committed. Were they not enemies of God? Were they not rising up

against God, going against everything Godly and holy? Would it be so wrong to protect those he loved from such men? He was fearfully made. Even he couldn't deny it, as much as he wanted to. His movements were slow and deliberate, his hands steady, his hearing, his senses, attuned to all around him.

God had given him abilities that exceeded those of most men. If he was honest, his ability with the rifle exceeded that of any man he'd ever known. The rifle felt but an extension of his hand, as much a part of him as his own fingers.

Not that he'd ever asked for such gifts and considered them more a curse than a blessing.

But if God had given them for a reason?

And yet why? He'd shot Paul. Tears slid down his face again as more of the words of the psalm came to him: "Surely the darkness shall cover me; even the night shall be light about me. Yea, the darkness hideth not from thee; but the night shineth as the day: the darkness and the light are both alike to thee."

The darkness had covered him, but even the night was light to God. He didn't understand why his brother had to die, but the War had killed not only Paul, but thousands upon thousands of good men. And those who were not killed had been maimed, if not in body, in spirit.

To God, even the blackest of times were the same as the light. He pondered that for a moment. He'd been so caught up in his own pain during the War that he'd not noticed the other men... much. But even he could not fail to notice how fast friendships formed, how the men helped one another, risked their own lives, brought light in the darkest of times.

Remembering was one more pain for him to bear for none had befriended him. Partly it was his own doing, the path he'd chosen, seeking solitude to nurse his sorrow.

But there was another reason he had been friendless. The men had been frightened of him, some perhaps jealous. He'd been a better shot by such a wide margin, that it was something they'd not been comfortable with. He'd heard more than one man say God's hand was upon him, and that was enough to frighten some away.

He'd tried to escape his fate, to run from God, but no matter where he went, God was with him, holding him fast, even when he'd been hit with the butt of the rifle and fell backwards, to be caught upon the tree limb.

In the weeks, months, since he'd shot his own brother, he had yearned for death, tasted it, tasted it as surely as he had tasted the blood that day when he'd been smacked in the mouth. He'd spit globs of blood and endured, hanging on the limb, quoting scripture, and scaring the man away.

And then had come the agonizing suturing of his mouth and chin wounds because God didn't give him what he wanted, had not quite been finished with him.

Maybe God saved his life for just such a time as this, when the town of Brokken was being threatened by a gang of outlaws. How could he simply walk away?

He couldn't. He wouldn't. Not from Deborah.

He looked at the rifle in his hands. It felt right. He prayed he'd not have to use it.

Chapter Thirty-nine

Chance decided to skirt the north side of town, to scout out the movements of the gang, but found their camp abandoned. Fear knocked on the door. He refused to answer, except to murmur *Amor fati.*

The main trail led to the southeast, although two smaller groups had splintered off. A pang of guilt assailed him. The main group had headed toward East Street, the place Fritz had asked him to guard. But surely, they'd found enough people to help. He prayed they were ready for the onslaught.

He scanned the area as he rode forward, every muscle tense, and pressed closer to his mount. As far as he knew, his horse had no name. *Fati*, he whispered, and patted the horse's neck. The mare tossed her head as if nodding in agreement. He pressed closer to her, knowing she would sense an unknown presence long before he did.

The tracks from the gang, as he'd already surmised, entered the town on East Street. Molly and Thomas lived on the very end, on the outskirts of town, and Chance gave the house a glance.

The tracks did not lead to their house, thankfully, although he doubted they were home. Molly owned the restaurant, and this was a busy time, getting close to the dinner hour.

A body lay on the ground, not far from the Reed home. Chance gave the body a quick glance, noting it was the butcher. If anyone else from town had been guarding the road, they were gone. He hoped they'd fled, not been shot down.

On the left, not far down the road from the Reed home, stood the school. He almost rode past it when he felt Fati tense. He pulled back on the reins when the door of the school creaked open. Fear beat a tattoo at the base of his throat until he recognized Miss Edna who peered through the cracked door.

He turned Fati off the street and rode right up to the school before he dismounted.

Her eyes were round and unfocused, looking beyond him. Yet, when she greeted him, her voice was calm and strong, from years of dealing with unruly children, he was sure. She'd been a fixture in

the town for many years, and Deborah held fond memories of her, and they'd occasionally taken treats to her, especially lately. Her health was not the best. She'd decided to retire at the end of the year, and Lydia's bookish sister, Beth, would be accepting the position.

Even now, the pallor of her skin was evident, whether from fear or illness, he didn't know. She searched his face. "Who were those men who rode by? I've never seen such a large group of riders."

He considered whether to tell her the truth but a moment. Enough lies had been told for a lifetime. "The Andrews Gang."

She put a hand to her throat, and fingered the medallion threaded through a silky black ribbon around her throat. She gave no other sign of agitation. "What are they doing here?"

He ignored her question and gestured inside. "Are the children all here? I don't hear a peep."

"Yes. I have them reading."

"Anyone else?"

"No. Miss Beth Walsh was here, but she left when those men rode by, to find out who they were."

Chance nodded. Miss Edna was a strict disciplinarian, and the children obeyed her—usually. Sometimes, one or two would get out of hand, like the Jennings boys, or Calvin and Devon.

"Good. Keep them here." He considered a moment. "Might be best to get them down low, on the floor."

She dropped her voice to a whisper and gave a half smile. "I can manage that. We'll make a game of it, pretend we're in a cave."

"And don't worry about the sounds from the roof. I'm going to climb up, to see if I can get a sight on where those men may have gone." Although he already knew, more than likely, they headed toward the bank.

She nodded. "I'll tell them it is Santa, come to check their behavior." She smiled, her face ashen but composed. "Thank you, Mr. Hale."

"Bolt the door," he warned her.

She did as he said, and he took Fati's reins and led her to a shed out back, beyond the outhouse, where the children's horses were kept, those who rode to school. Fati nickered softly at the other horses, and he left her, and headed back to the back of the building.

The school bell was in a square tower on top, and someone had had the foresight to make it easier to climb to the top for repairs.

For on the wall were handholds, simple short pieces of wood that had been nailed into place. He glanced around, made sure no one watched and climbed with his rifle.

Not wishing to frighten the children, he made an extra effort to tread softly, although his naturally quiet step made little sound.

As he walked toward the bell, his gaze swept the area. He had a good view of the town hall, the Brokken Bank, to the south, and Molly's Restaurant, the butcher's shop, and the Brokken General Store to the north. He could not see beyond the buildings into the street. However, where East Street intersected with Main, a group of men gathered, a small group of only five or six. Two of them favored Fritz, and he suspected they were the two missing Brokken brothers. Their hands were tied behind their backs. His eyes adjusted, his vision sharpened, and he counted three others, arms folded, relaxed.

He calculated the distance and knew he could make the shot, shoot all three men before they knew what hit them. He hesitated, not only because of his reluctance to shoot the rifle, but afraid of what lay beyond the buildings. Fritz had said there were upwards of thirty men. Shooting three would not solve the problem. In the chaos that would be sure to follow, Deborah's brothers might be killed.

He looked to the south but could make out no figures, no movement. Where were Klint, Fritz, and Deborah? And hadn't they gathered more folks to help? The minutes ticked by. Had he made a mistake climbing onto the roof of the school? What good was he doing?

A smell traveled to him, carried on the wind. *Smoke.*

Although a tight fit, he climbed into the bell tower, placing a hand on the bell to still it, and looked for the source of smoke. The smell grew stronger, and horses neighed in the distance. And then all hell broke loose.

A popping sounded—*gunfire*. Flames leapt from several buildings —the bank, the general store, the butcher's shop, the restaurant. He stood to get a better look. Riders on horseback galloped from the middle of town, the gang fleeing. Klint, Fritz, and perhaps others had driven them from Main Street. They fled toward him and the school. He ducked behind the bell, praying they'd ride by.

Instead, four of the men turned to the schoolhouse, torches in hand. Surely, they would not set fire to the building, not with

children inside? Glass broke as one of the men flung his torch.

And then, from the other riders, more broke off, perhaps ten, and circled back to the school. Chance laid down suppression fire, and they pulled their horses up, hesitating.

A group turned their horses and rejoined the riders who fled down the road, but that left eight circling the school, firing toward the school bell. Chance raised his rifle to his shoulder, stood, and fired. Shots whizzed by him, but he ignored them, intent on his targets.

These men Chance took care of swiftly, beginning with the men who carried torches. Even so, flames leapt from inside the building, and the front stoop also burned. Chance grabbed the clapper of the bell and clanged it, until his heart beat like an angry fist in his chest.

No one appeared to help, but the children, followed by their teacher, clambered out the window on the west side. Chance slid to the edge, to watch as the children made their escape.

Chance looked to the west. A couple of stragglers rode by, the last of the gang, and he raised his rifle, but they rode at a fast gallop and were difficult to get a bead on. He chose to let them go.

Miss Edna was a hundred or so yards safely away from the licking flames, ushering the children ahead of her, except for a young girl who held her hand. The teacher glanced over her shoulder, spotted Chance, and fully turned to give a signal that all the children were safe.

But uneasiness fluttered in his gut. He felt disoriented, as if he had slipped off the roof and dangled there, effects from inhalation of the smoke, he suspected. He had to get off the roof. Parts already collapsed, leaving gaping holes between him and the handholds in the back. And yet, he continued watching her.

Fear clawed at his belly for her safety and the safety of her charges, but they were now out of reach of the bullets, out of the reach of those who had fled. Miss Edna gave him a wave of thanks as the bell pinged.

Chance knew, without turning, that the last straggler had fired and missed. But something in the way the teacher stood drew his attention, and he barely glanced as the man rode by.

He kept his eyes on Miss Edna, attempting to discern his uneasiness. Slowly, almost imperceptibly, the teacher slumped to the ground.

Chance frowned. Had she fainted? No one was close enough to have shot her. Flames continued leaping behind him, from inside the school, up through the holes that had burned through the roof.

He ignored them as his eyes scanned the area. Not a soul moved. The man who had fired the last shot was gone, leaving only dust that settled in the direction he had ridden.

Chance still stood, unmoving, perplexed, when he looked back to Miss Edna. Surely, she must have fainted—her health had been poorly, after all. At her waist, a red satin ribbon shimmered in the sun.

He squinted. Miss Edna had not been wearing red. The young girl, seemingly too young to be a student, stood next to her, tugging her hand. Miss Edna remained unmoving. The flames from the school licked higher, and his dizziness increased. It took all his strength to move his legs, as if he'd already fallen and had yet to comprehend it. He slipped and slid across the roof, making it to the back, and scrambled over the side as the roof collapsed, leaving only the backwall. He worked his way down the footholds, jumped the last few feet to the ground, and sprinted to the teacher's side.

He knelt next to the girl, pulling her hand loose from Miss Edna's limp one. He knew without checking that the woman was dead. Even though he had not known her well, tears formed in his eyes.

The little girl reached again for Miss Edna's hand. "G'maw, get up."

Chance lifted the girl in his arms. "Grandma? Was she your grandmother?"

The little girl nodded, her blonde hair blowing in the cold wind. Chance glanced around until he located the other children. They huddled in a small group, on the platform at the depot. Luckily, it had not been set on fire.

He trotted over to them, noting other buildings still burned. A couple of the girls on the platform looked to be twelve or thirteen, old enough to watch the little girl. He set her down.

"I have to go, but I'll be back to check on you... Miss?" He blinked at the little girl.

"Sally," the youngster said.

He nodded. "Miss Sally, stay with Missy." He recognized the girl he pointed to as the butcher's daughter. "Missy, you'll take good care of her?"

Missy nodded and took the little girl's hand. Chance ran down the street, toward the center of town, filling with smoke. He glanced over his shoulder, and the little girl watched, her eyes large and solemn, her long blonde hair blowing in the wind.

Chapter Forty

Deborah joined with the others to pass buckets of water for Fritz to pour on the flames from the bank. She didn't want to think and focused on the feel of the bucket, concentrated on not spilling a drop as she passed it along.

Her mind did not want to comprehend what her eyes saw. Curt and Karl sprawled in the street, not more than twenty feet from her place in line, and red fanned from them. Miss Abby was tending to them, the best she could. Her glance sought Deborah's more than once, as if she pleaded for understanding. Understand what? That her brothers lay dying in the streets? Her bottom lip quivered. She sniffled, inhaling the smoke that grew thicker around them. She looked down at the bucket in her hand before she passed it to the person beside her.

If her shoulders ached, if her hands grew tired, she did not know it. She was numb and operated mechanically, feeling nothing, wanting to feel nothing.

She blinked when someone ran by, someone she knew. She focused, and Chance came into view. He threw her a terse smile of relief before kneeling beside Miss Abby. In but a moment, he had Curt in his arms, carrying him as easily as a child, across the street, down Main, toward the doctor's office. He returned in a few minutes to scoop up Karl, and Abby followed him.

New life infused her arms, and she called out encouraging words to those near her, Sophia and Lavendar. And then, blessed relief, coming down West Street, at a gallop, were Sheriff Victoria and the men of Brokken.

They slid from their horses before coming to a complete stop. The men moved forward to help, and Deborah, Lavendar, and Sophia stepped back to allow them to take their places.

Without a word, Deborah headed toward Miss Abby's. Sophia and Lavender fell in step beside her, hurrying to catch up.

Sophia reached a hand to grab Deborah's arm, stopping her. "Do you want us to go in with you?"

Deborah shook her head wearily. "No, ma'am. I'm fine."

Sophia nodded. "We're going to check the hotel, to make sure

those ruffians did no damage there."

Deborah nodded. She moved along the path to Miss Abby's and opened the door without knocking. Her legs weakened. Her entire body ached. And yet, the numbness had not left her. She moved on automatic, her heart knowing she could not bear the pain of losing her brothers if it left.

Chance came down the hallway toward her, and she went into his arms. He wrapped her tightly, rocking gently before releasing her.

His intense eyes focused on her for a brief second, as if seeing into her very soul, plunging the depths, seeking her out. "I have to go, Deborah. They need my help. The children from the school are at the depot... without their teacher."

And then he was gone.

Her weakened legs carried her forward. Curt and Karl were in the front parlor, on makeshift beds. Their closed eyes, their pallor, as still as death, their chests moving almost imperceptibly, but they breathed. The alternative was too painful to contemplate, and the numbness returned.

Miss Abby smiled weakly. "I'm doing my best. If only Mathew were here!"

"He is. Sheriff Vic just returned," Deborah said, smiling weakly.

Relief flooded Abby's face. "I'm sure he'll be here shortly."

Deborah studied her brothers again, as impassionately as if she looked upon a rock. "Will they survive?"

Abby shrugged. "Only time will tell. Curt lost a lot of blood, and Karl has a stomach wound. It's possible the bullets missed any vital organs, but if his intestine was perforated..." She let her words trail off.

Deborah nodded again. "Chance said the children were at the depot. I'll go fetch them."

"It's terrible what happened to Miss Edna."

"What happened?" Deborah asked, listlessly.

"Chance didn't tell you?" Miss Abby clasped her hands together and looked down. "A bullet ricocheted from the school bell. It killed her. Instantly, from what Chance said."

"At least she did not suffer," Deborah replied, listlessly. Miss Edna dead, her brothers barely clinging to life, half the town burning... and Deborah felt nothing. Nevertheless, she had a job to do. "I'll take the children to the hotel for now. Sophia and Lavendar

can help with them."

Miss Abby gave her a hug that Deborah did not return. "I'll take good care of your brothers."

Deborah pulled away. "I've got to go." And she went out and to the depot. She slowed her steps as she neared the children. They huddled together, the youngest ones, at the very end of the platform.

Deborah breathed deeply and brought forth a smile, weak though it was, as wobbly as her legs had become. "Who wants some of Miss Sophia's egg custard?"

Several heads nodded, and when she motioned, they moved forward.

One of the older boys, who'd been standing away from the others, narrowed his eyes at her and stepped in front of the children. "Don't go with her. It's Deborah Brokken. She's wanted by the sheriff, along with her brothers, and those other two fellows."

Deborah straightened her shoulders. "That was all a misunderstanding." She attempted to brighten her smile, but the boy crossed his arms.

A little girl whom she'd never seen before broke free from an older girl, Missy, and ran to her. "I want my g'maw."

Deborah lifted her in her arms, the girl as light as a feather. "Who is your grandmother? We'll find her in a minute."

The boy laughed harshly. "Not alive, you won't."

Missy Maddux punched the boy in the arm. "Stop it, Joshua."

Deborah's heart sank. Miss Edna was her grandmother? Miss Edna never mentioned she had children, not since Deborah had known her.

Missy motioned to the younger children. "We're going with Miss Brokken. Come along."

To Deborah's relief, the children obeyed Missy. Deborah bit her bottom lip. Did Missy know her father had been killed, shot down in the street? For a moment, the numbness broke and tears threatened, but she blinked them away. She had to stay calm for the children.

The hotel was only a short distance from the depot. Sophia and Lavendar were working at one of the dining room tables when they entered, filling baskets with food.

Both widened their eyes at the children and exchanged a glance with Deborah, who was too tired to explain.

“You’ve brought us some pleasant company, I see,” Sophia exclaimed with false brightness.

“Yes, ma’am. The children were at the depot.”

One of the children stepped forward, a child Deborah did not know. He must have come with his father when the town had advertised for men. “The school is burning down,” he said matter-of-factly.

Deborah shushed him and turned back to Sophia. “Do you have any custard pie? I promised them some.”

Lavendar nodded vigorously. “We made five this morning. I’ll make sure everyone gets a piece as soon as I get back. I’m delivering this to fortify those who are fighting the fires.”

“The older boys can help, Lavendar. I’ll get the pie for the children,” Sophia said.

She headed to the kitchen and the children followed. The little girl still in Deborah’s arms wiggled to get down, and she set her on her feet.

After the last child disappeared through the kitchen door, Deborah put the boys to work, to finish packing the baskets.

She pulled Lavendar aside. “Who is that little girl?”

“Miss Edna’s granddaughter,” she whispered.

Deborah frowned“But Miss Edna had no children.”

“The rumor is…” Lavendar tilted her head closer to Deborah. “Miss Edna had a child out of wedlock, before ever coming to Brokken, all those years ago. I don’t know how her daughter found her but find her she did. Last week, she arrived by stagecoach with that little girl.”

“Where is Miss Edna’s daughter now? She needs to know her mother has been killed.” Deborah should have softened her words, judging from Lavendar’s reaction.

The woman blanched, put a hand to her chest, and took a step back, as if hit. “No! Oh, bless that baby’s heart.”

Deborah nodded, as if she felt the same pain. “Where’s her mother?”

“She left. She took the same stagecoach out.”

Lavendar’s cheeks were still pale, so pale Deborah touched her shoulder. “Are you all right? Do you need a glass of water?”

“Tea would be more to my liking, and we just made a fresh pot.” Lavendar looked at Deborah more closely. “You’re the one who needs to sit down before you fall down. My goodness, you are

pale!"

Lavendar took her arm and led her to a chair. Deborah gladly sank down, beyond exhausted. Lavendar poured her a cup of tea.

Deborah longed to put her head on her arms, to sleep, but the children were in her care. She would not leave them. "What's the little girl's name?"

"Sally. Sally Jane. She's three or four years old—I'm not quite sure. Sally Jane was one of the reasons Miss Edna was retiring."

"Oh." And what was to become of the little girl now? She'd talk to Sheriff Vic and see if they could track down her mother.

Lavendar touched her arm gently. "How are your brothers?"

Deborah's mouth refused to work. It twitched until she gave in and laid her head on her arms. The numbness had gone, replaced with a hopeless sorrow. She cried to rid herself of her pain and heartache, cried until she hiccupped, and still she cried, for the pain remained, She inhaled with the desperation of a drowning woman, for that's what she was—a woman drowning in her tears. Lavendar patted her back and made soothing noises. Deborah regretted distressing her, as she knew she must be doing, but the tears would not abate.

Sophia returned with the children, and the tears finally abated. Deborah was able to assuage her grief. She quickly sat up and swiped at her cheeks.

"I'll be back in a moment," she mumbled to Sophia and made her way to the kitchen.

She splashed water on her face and wiped it with a dishcloth. She had no idea what had happened to her own handkerchief. She still wore the britches from the other day, when she and Lydia had broken the men out of jail.

Lavendar, her face soft and mild, came into the kitchen, bringing her a cup of tea in a porcelain cup. Lavendar had changed into a pale pink dress with rosebuds and a triple flounced skirt. Probably Deborah should change, too, but she could not summon the energy to walk home to do so.

After Lavendar left, Deborah slid on the bench picked the thin cup up from its saucer, held it with both hands, and raised it in front of her, as if an oblation to the gods. Tears still stung, felt as if they'd sting her forever.

After a moment, she took a sip of the tea, warm and soothing. And then she ate a piece of pie she did not want. She fiddled with

the fork and time passed. After a while, she struggled to her feet and began gathering the dishes left scattered on the long farm table.

Although the dining room and front rooms of the hotel were elegantly maintained, the kitchen was more to Deborah's style, more like a farmhouse kitchen, like the one at the hunting house, although this one was much bigger. She should have gone back, to check on the children, but could not bear to see Sally Jane. Her mother had abandoned her to a grandmother she did not know and now that grandmother was gone. What would happen to her now? And who would tell the little girl her "g'maw" was gone? Or did she already know, told by the other children?

Deborah washed the last dessert plate and wished she had Isaac, more for his company than for his help to dry for her, as he'd done at the hunting house, a few short months ago. Could it have been only a few months ago she'd met Chance on the train?

The door from the dining room opened, and Deborah glanced over her shoulder. It was Chance. And he was holding Sally Jane who held to him as if for dear life.

Chance spoke calmly, levelly. "We finally got the fires out."

Deborah took his cue and spoke flatly, with no inflection. "How much damage?"

"The bank has the least. Much of our effort was concentrated there. The general store can be repaired, as can the restaurant. Probably won't take long, a few weeks, before they re-open."

Deborah was well aware he had not mentioned the school nor the butcher shop, and she did not ask about them. After searching his eyes for a moment, she moved restlessly. "I need to send the children home."

"No need. Their parents came looking for them. They're all gone except..." He inclined his head to the little girl.

Sally Jane laid her head on Chance's shoulder. "I go home now."

"Yes, you can go home with me," Deborah said.

Sally Jane shook her head. "With him." She poked her finger in Chance's chest.

Deborah glanced at Chance and then back to Sally. "You can't go with him, darling."

"Perhaps she can." Chance's eyes looked distressed, hopeful, and pained by turns.

Deborah frowned at him. "Chance! You cannot go home with me, if that's what you are thinking."

“Are you still angry?” The hopeful look returned, and his breathing deepened and slowed.

Tears filled her eyes, and her lips twitched again in an effort to form words until she simply shook her head.

“Good. Preacher Grisson will be happy to marry us, if you are willing.”

“Of course, but he can’t tonight,” she choked out. She could not stop the tears from spilling down her cheeks again and grabbed the dishcloth for a handkerchief. Her weeping quieted with her exhaustion although the tears still flowed.

Chance massaged the back of his neck. “Yes. Right this minute, as a matter of fact.” He held Sally Jane with one arm and held out his free hand for Deborah.

She took his warm hand that felt so right in hers, and they went into the dining room. She was blinded by her tears and kept her head down.

Chance spoke, to Sophia, she assumed. “We’re taking her home with us. Deborah has agreed.”

Deborah heard a laugh. *Klint’s*. She swallowed hard, looked up, and blinked. The room was filled with people—Klint, Fritz and Lydia, Jake and Rebecca, even their shy sister Beth, Sheriff Vic, Preacher Grisson and Miss Trudie, Sophia, Lavendar, Molly, her husband Tom, Isaac, her grandparents, and even Miss Abby.

She searched Abby’s face, and Abby gave a simple nod, and she knew her brothers were all right, for now. Sophia offered to take Sally Jane, but she would not let go of Chance’s neck. “She can stay here with me,” Chance said. “Ready, Deborah?”

Preacher Grisson had his Bible open. “Shall we begin?”

Deborah clung to Chance’s arm as her knees weakened. This was too much, after all that had happened. Her tears flowed again.

This was never how she imagined marrying, but did the wedding matter? Only the man beside her did.

She released Chance, and her eyes searched the crowd until she caught sight of the man who had been like a father to her. “Isaac...” Tears still flowed, but he understood her.

He came and held out his arm, and she took it. He smiled. “It’s my honor to give the bride away.”

Lavendar clapped. “We’ve always wanted a wedding here. Go to the landing and walk down the stairs.”

She and Isaac did as Lavendar asked. Chance, still holding Sally,

waited with Preacher Grisson. Someone handed a washcloth to Isaac.

“Give us a moment,” he said to the crowd, and people turned away and gave Deborah a moment to at least wash the soot from her face.

She leaned her head closer to Isaac to whisper. “It’s looks like Sally has taken a liking to Chance. Why?”

“Sometimes people just recognize each other.” His warm brown eyes sparkled as he gazed into hers.

Deborah nodded and took his arm. Isaac cleared his throat, and everyone quieted. Deborah’s fingers dug into Isaac’s arm so tightly he winced but did not try to loosen her grip.

He led her down the steps, and then the few feet to Chance who never took his gaze from her face. Those eyes burned into her and warmed her and made her forget her weariness.

Isaac may have said something when he released her. If so, she did not hear. All she was aware of was that Chance clasped her hand again. Her fingers wrapped around his.

Her tears still blinded her, tears of happiness, as Preacher Grisson said, “We’re gathered here today…”

She’d never be able to say, “I do,” but maybe a nod would do the job.

Chapter Forty-one

Chance was frustrated. Sally Jane had not let him out of her sight the entire night. She slept between them, and when he tried to move her to her own bed, she woke and cried. He'd finally given up on getting closer to Deborah and had finally slept but awakened early. Sally Jane continued sleeping as he quietly slipped from the bed.

He thought of awakening Deborah, sneaking into another bedroom but discarded the idea. The last few days had been hell on her, and she needed her rest.

He went into the kitchen and made the coffee. The sun was up, high in the sky. He'd been dead tired, too, and overslept.

Chance got the fire started in the wood stove, made coffee, and poked around the kitchen. There was not much food around. Fritz had had his saddlebags bulging with food, probably from cleaning out the kitchen.

Chance was strangely calm for someone who had no idea what awaited—if he'd be arrested, or if Deborah would, very likely, both. All his focus was on Deborah, and he cared for nothing else—well, except for the little girl asleep in the bed by his wife.

He smiled when he thought of last night's events. Deborah's group of family and friends had all entered the hotel together, he supposed wanting to comfort each other and to speak with Deborah.

Sally Jane, who had been whining in Sophia's lap, caught sight of him and squirmed to escape her grasp. She'd run to Chance and threw her arms around his neck.

Still holding the little girl, he'd called the sheriff aside, then and there, and told her he wanted to marry Deborah immediately. Partly, it was because of Sally Jane. It had twisted his heart almost from his chest when he'd seen her, looking so forlorn, on the platform at the depot. Someone had to take her, care for her, and he wanted it to be him.

Not that he felt guilty about her grandmother's death. What were the odds that a bullet would ricochet from the school bell at the exact angle, to the exact distance to where Miss Edna stood?

Probably he should have shot the man as he rode by, but he refused to assume that guilt.

It was not his fault, but that of physics, of bad luck, of something... He could not assign it to God, except perhaps God allowed it to happen. Even if it was God's doing, Heaven was simply a matter of opening a door, of crossing a bridge, going from one existence to another. And if the Bible were to be believed, it was a place where all tears were wiped away. His belief had wavered during the War, when he'd shot his own brother, and then when his parents had disowned him, and his older brother had turned him out.

However, it had led him here, to Deborah, perhaps to Sally Jane. And if he'd learned anything, it was that life was short. His faith was weak but perhaps it would strengthen with time.

So, he had asked the sheriff, although he wasn't sure if she could have stopped him from marrying, and she'd only studied him a moment before she nodded her assent.

Deborah, Lavendar said, was in the kitchen. He'd looked around at all the folks in the hotel, all the people Deborah cared about, and knew no reason to delay their marriage. Preacher Grisson, sitting on the purple velvet settee, had agreed, and it became a matter of convincing Deborah, and that had been much easier than he anticipated. He still couldn't believe his good fortune, his wife, Deborah, whom he'd loved from the moment he'd seen her. He was content or would be if the little girl ever allowed him near Deborah.

From the way it stood now, Sally Jane was not going to let him have a moment alone with his wife, and it would take time to help her feel safe, safe enough to let him from her sight. A knock sounded at the door.

It was Calvin Meyers. "Good morning, Mr. Hale. The sheriff sent me to deliver a message." Calvin peered around Chance.

"What are you doing?" Chance asked irritably. He had not even had his first cup of coffee and wasn't up for chitchat.

Calvin smiled up at him and raised his eyebrows. "I was looking for Mrs. Hale. I heard you and Miss Deborah tied the knot."

Chance frowned at him. "She's indisposed. What does the sheriff want?"

Calvin got very still and focused on a spot on the door frame near Chance's head. "She said to inform you the circuit judge will be in the conference room at the bank at two o'clock sharp. You

and Miss Deborah... I mean, Mrs. Hale are to be there." He looked down at his boots when he spoke his next words. "Said if she had to come after you, you'd be in a sorry mess."

Chance gritted his teeth and spoke through a clenched jaw. "Tell the sheriff we will be there."

He closed the door in Calvin's face and then felt a little ashamed. It wasn't Calvin's fault. He was only the messenger.

Chance grimaced. Still, that boy had come to ogle Deborah. Chance grimaced and then laughed at his jealousy of the youngster.

Deborah appeared in the doorway, and Sally Jane pushed past her and made a beeline to Chance.

"You left me," the little girl accused.

"Look," Chance said without picking her up. "I can't carry you with me everywhere I go."

Her bottom lip trembled, and Deborah frowned at him and made a motion with the back of her hands.

He obeyed his wife and picked the little girl up and took a seat at the table. "Coffee's on the stove, Deborah."

"I'll pour us a cup." She gave a big yawn. "Who was that at the door?"

"Calvin. He had a message from the sheriff. The judge wants us to meet in the conference room of the bank at two today."

"Today? But the bank burned, and we need to help clean up." She set his coffee down in front of him and took a seat across from him, cradling her own cup.

He tried not to look directly at his wife. Even straight out of bed, with tiredness showing in her eyes from the day before, she was the loveliest woman he'd ever seen. He spoke to the wall instead. "Only the front of the lobby burned. The conference room is still intact."

"Thank goodness for that. Father spent a fortune on the table and chairs. Hired a craftsman from southeast Texas to handmake the furniture." His eyes were drawn to her as she absently wrapped a curl around a finger.

Chance nodded, not really interested in furniture, especially not with his new wife sitting across the table from him. He inclined his head to touch the top of Sally Jane's. "What are we going to do with her?"

"I hungry," Sally Jane said.

Chance stood with her in his arms. "Sit with Miss Deborah, and I'll make breakfast."

Sally Jane kicked, locked her legs, and refused to bend her knees. “No.”

Chance frowned at Deborah who got to her feet. “Sally, Chance can’t hold you all the time.”

“Why?”

“He has other things he needs to do.” Her eyes met his, and she smiled.

Her silky skin begged for his hand, but Sally Jane kicked at Deborah, and her hold tightened around his neck. Chance loosened her arms, but to little avail. He looked to his wife for help.

She shrugged. “I don’t think we have any food in the house. Why don’t we go to Molly’s?”

Chance smiled. “I’m sure she’s not open today, but it shouldn’t take Tom and Molly long to get the restaurant up and running. How about the hotel?”

Deborah nodded. “All right. We’ll be going by the doctor’s office, and I can stop to check on Curt and Karl.”

Chance nodded, and he prayed they’d find them still among the living. And then he reconsidered his prayer. Karl had suffered a gut wound, and it wasn’t very likely he’d survive. Such a death was agonizing—he’d seen enough of them during the War to know.

His wife, Sally Jane, the meeting with the judge, the damage to the town, and Deborah’s brothers on the brink of death—it all came crashing down. Pressure from all directions squeezed him, pressed so that he had to do something. He paced the floor with Sally Jane in his arms.

“What’s wrong?” Deborah asked him.

“Nothing and everything.”

“You mean the judge? I don’t think we’ll go to prison… Do you? I mean the money was not stolen…” Her face turned up to his, and she searched his eyes.

“Yes, but you and Lydia broke us out of jail. We led the sheriff on a merry race, leaving the town unprotected from that gang.” Tightness entered his chest and threatened to choke him.

“You think Sheriff Vic could have stopped the gang from—” She broke off and looked at Sally Jane as if she’d thought better of what she planned to say.

Chance shrugged. “Who can say? I don’t mean to worry you…”

A smile spread across her face. “Funny, but I’m not worried. I suppose so much has happened that whatever our fate, it seems

insignificant. Do you feel that way?"

"Yes." He loosened Sally Jane's arms and held them to the side as he bent to plant a kiss on his wife's warm lips.

Her eyes darkened. A flicker of excitement passed through her eyes. "If prison awaits us, perhaps we need to redeem the time while we can."

His breathing deepened as ease and excitement eased in his stomach. "We have a slight problem."

Deborah tilted her head. "When we stop to check on my brothers, I'll talk to Abby. She has a way with children."

He certainly hoped so, but he wasn't sure. "Go get ready."

"Are you in a hurry?" Her eyes sparkled, teasing him.

"As a matter of fact, I am." He freed a hand and reached out to her, capturing and holding her hand against his cheek.

And she pulled away, laughed, and ran from the room. "I'll be ready faster than you can say Jack Robinson," she called over her shoulder.

Chapter Forty-two

Deborah brushed away her irritation. It wasn't Sally Jane's fault. Who could blame her after all she'd been through? Too bad the little girl latched onto Chance with such ferocity that it made it impossible for Deborah to get close to her own husband.

The short time it had taken Chance to bathe and dress had turned to pure agony for Deborah. Sally Jane's pouts had turned to tears and then to screams before Chance emerged. He offered an apology, but he had no need. He'd taken no more than ten minutes.

After they checked on Curt and Karl, and finding them unchanged from the day before, she'd asked Abby for help, as she had promised Chance. All Abby told her was to have patience. Even Mathew's son Ethan could not entice Sally Jane from Chance's lap nor could the temptation of sweets at the hotel. Sally Jane stuck to Chance like a tick.

They stayed at the hotel, in the lobby, whiling away the time, hoping to distract the little girl. Nothing worked. She'd fallen asleep in Chance's arms.

The weather had warmed, and they found a sunny spot on the veranda of the hotel and waited. Deborah looked at the sleeping girl in Chance's arms. Her irritation must have shown.

His face held a tender expression. "She'll adjust, Deborah."

"I suppose. Eventually." Deborah laughed, not without some bitterness. By the time Sally adjusted, they might both be serving prison sentences.

"Maybe we need to search for her mother." He pressed his lips together and looked away as if it had pained him to say it.

Deborah raised her eyebrows. "I thought we were going to?"

He shot her a quick glance. "Sophia made it sound as if her mother abandoned her. I see no need if that is the case."

"The woman is still her mother, and we need to find her. And even if she does not want her, it's possible Miss Edna had other family." Not that she didn't want Sally to stay with them. Her heart ached for the young girl.

Chance's words, when he spoke, were innocuous, but his eyes were guarded. "What time is it?"

“Quarter till. I suppose we can walk toward the bank.” The weather was warmer than it had been for the past few days, although still cool.

The sun shone brightly, but the smell of smoke still hung heavily in the air. The walk depressed her, and the brightness of the day brought home the amount of destruction. The burnt front of the bank affected her the most, her father’s pride and joy. Deborah was sure Fritz or Klint had taken measures to secure the gold in the jars. If she’d opened that jar of marmalade, how different might things have turned out? But it was too late now. The past was immutable.

To drive the dreary thoughts away, she turned to Chance. “Do you want me to carry her?”

Chance had to be tired from carrying her around all day. Sally slept peacefully and might not awaken if Chance placed her in her arms.

He shook his head, his face grim. “I can manage.”

They walked down Main Street and saw no one about. Folks were probably tired from the events of the day before and were resting. The town was eerily quiet, quieter than Deborah ever remembered. Thomas Reed, one of the few people on the street, stood outside of Molly’s Restaurant, surveying the damage.

“Do you need any help?” Chance asked.

Deborah did not understand why. There was very little he could do with the little girl in his arms.

“No. The supplies disappeared quickly from what was left of the general store. Some men have gone over to Woodland to bring back more.”

That explained some of the quietness, but surely not everyone had gone.

Thomas looked to the sleeping child and then raised his glance to Chance. “She’s a pretty little thing. A shame about Miss Edna.”

Chance gave a nod but did not answer.

Deborah spoke, her head slightly bowed, afraid Sally might awaken. “It certainly is. Please give Molly my regards.”

She raised a hand in good-bye, and they turned to walk up North Main Street. Her heart ached. The Brokkens needed to help out the reparations of the town. She’d speak to Fritz when she saw him.

The butcher shop had burned to the ground, and Missy sat in front of where her father’s shop used to stand.

Deborah smiled a tentative greeting.

"Are you going to the bank?" Missy asked them.

Deborah nodded.

"I'll walk with you." Missy stood and brushed the dirt from her dress. "Sheriff Vic is already there. I'm staying with her," she confided.

"For how long?" Chance asked.

"I will stay for my father's funeral. I have family back East, and Sheriff Vic will telegraph them after she ... finishes at the bank."

Deborah pressed her lips together, surprised that the girl seemed so little affected by the burning of the shop and the death of her father, although she'd heard the butcher had been a hard man with little patience.

Missy's eyes were red-rimmed. Perhaps she was one of those who hid their emotions. "Did you say you were staying with the sheriff?" Deborah asked.

"I had nowhere else to go. I suppose I could have stayed at the hotel, but I'd rather stay with the sheriff."

They reached the bank, and Missy held out her arms. "If you'd like, I'll keep Sally with me."

Chance frowned at her and shook his head. "She's no trouble. I'll hold her."

Deborah was not so sure. If she awakened, she'd probably make a fuss. And what would the judge think? But a look at Chance made her reconsider her words she almost spoke aloud. If they were lucky, she'd sleep through the meeting.

The smell of smoke was heavy throughout the town, but Deborah choked with more than the smoke when she entered through the front of the bank. Some smoke particles had not yet settled and swirled as they passed. Luckily, the cuckoo clock had not burned.

She looked to Chance for help and sighed. Klint or Fritz would take it down for her, and she'd make sure her grandfather's clock was protected until the bank was repaired. At least, someone had swept out the heavy soot. Chance called her name and cocked his head at the door. She opened the conference room door for him.

The judge waited with the sheriff, their heads bent together over a sheaf of papers. When they entered, Judge Davis gave a short nod, and they took a seat.

The judge ignored them and instead read the papers he held in

his hand.

The sheriff cleared her throat, cast a glance at the judge, who remained engrossed in reading, and then slid an envelope across the table to Chance. “Please do not open it until this is over.”

Chance’s forehead furrowed. “What is this?”

“For once, do as I say and ask no questions.” The sheriff leaned back and crossed her arms.

Chance shot Deborah a look. She shrugged. He picked up the envelope and folded it to fit into his pocket, shifting Sally so he could do so.

Fritz, Lydia, and Klint joined them within a few minutes, and the sheriff nodded at the judge to begin.

Judge Davis took his gavel and struck the table. Deborah winced, afraid he’d left a mark on the wood. He shuffled the papers in front of him while he spoke. “This is a preliminary hearing to determine how we are to proceed. Sheriff English has informed me of extenuating circumstances and has provided me with a detailed report of all that has occurred.”

He looked around the table, studying each of them in turn. Deborah kept her hands folded in her lap, as a lady should. She tilted her chin up when the judge’s gaze landed on her.

He went back to shuffling the papers. “I have to say that this is confusing, to say the least. Let me see if I have this straight. The bank’s money was converted to gold and stored in jars of orange marmalade?”

Fritz spoke, his voice clear and strong. “Yes, sir.”

“Craziest thing I’ve ever heard. However, if the gold never left the bank, I suppose no bank robbery occurred.”

Fritz kept his face smooth, but Deborah, who knew her brother so well, saw the relief. Lydia could not contain her elation and grabbed Fritz’s hand and let out a small squeal, which the judge squelched with one look.

“However, that does not excuse the behavior of all of you gathered here. A jailbreak occurred, resulting in considerable damage that you are responsible for.”

Fritz again spoke. “Yes, sir. We take full responsibility and will reimburse the town. As a matter of fact, we will make improvements to the jail, modernize it.”

Chance shot Deborah’s brother a look. Deborah bit her lip, hoping Chance would not speak, but he did. “Sorry, Judge Davis,

may I interrupt?

The judge nodded his assent.

"I wish to clarify exactly what my brother-in-law means by 'we.'" Chance's gaze locked with Fritz's.

Deborah sighed. Would they never learn to get along?

Fritz tilted his head. "We, of course, means the Brokken family."

"Since Deborah is no longer a Brokken, that does not include her." Chance dropped his gaze to the child who continued to sleep in his arms.

"We can discuss the details later," Fritz said, with obvious irritation.

A muscle in Chance's jaw twitched, but he did not reply.

The judge gave a nod to Fritz. "If that is resolved, I will continue. Even if you make reparations, you still broke out of jail, and these two young ladies..." The judge consulted one of the papers in front of him. "Lydia Walsh and Deborah Brokken..."

Chance's head snapped up. "Deborah Hale."

The judge glared at him before he continued. "These two young ladies aided in the jailbreak." He placed the papers in front of him and straightened them. "Again, there were extenuating circumstances. Curt and Karl Brokken were being held in a Mexican prison?"

Fritz nodded. "Yes, sir." Her brother was immaculately dressed, his manner deferential and yet not subservient.

For what good it did him. The judge nailed him with a stare. "Why not inform the sheriff? She would have taken the necessary steps to have freed these men."

Sheriff Vic joined the judge in glaring at Fritz although she did not speak.

"Again, I will take full responsibility for that." Fritz's eyes remained serious.

Chance raised his head to frown at him. Deborah knew what her husband thought. *It was Fritz's responsibility*, and her brother made it sound as if he was magnanimous in accepting it.

Fritz shot Chance a look before turning back to the judge. "As you undoubtedly heard, Emperor Maximilian was executed in June of this year. I felt, perhaps wrongly, that the state of Texas would not want to be involved in such a volatile situation. I deeply regret I did not explore all options. However, time was of the essence."

The judge studied him for many long seconds and shook his

head. “You’re a well-spoken young man but I fear you have behaved foolishly, criminally, in fact. However, we have one last extenuating circumstance—you, Mr. Caper, and Mr. Hale contributed to...”

Chance held up a hand.

The judge sighed deeply and tilted his head. “Yes, Mr. Hale?”

“You are forgetting Miss Brokken... I mean, my wife, Mrs. Chance Hale.”

The judge shook his head, perused the papers again, and nodded. “I see she also contributed to saving the town from further damage.” He gave her a nod, and Chance gave her a tight-lipped smile.

Sheriff Vic spoke for the first time. “Yes, they all behaved gallantly. However, if I had not been out chasing them, with most of the men of the town as my posse, perhaps we would have prevented this before it happened. And, but for the Brokkens, would we be in this situation?”

Fritz and Deborah exchanged a look. Sheriff Vic, for all intents and purposes, seemed bent on jailing at least one of them.

The judge shook his head slowly. “The burning of the town was unfortunate, but I believe you underestimate the Andrews Gang. They have burned entire towns, killed dozens, carried off—” He waved a hand as if reconsidering what he was about to say before continuing. “There’s no way of knowing what the outcome would have been. These three young men, whom I understand were all sharpshooters during the War, managed to kill more members of the Andrews Gang than any Texas lawmen in the past five years—not that I don’t have the greatest respect for those who serve the great state of Texas.”

Sheriff Vic bowed her head in acquiesce.

“And while it was the gold belonging to the Brokkens that the gang sought, I can scarcely blame them for the actions of these outlaws.” The judge drummed his fingers on the table and again sighed heavily, appearing perplexed.

“I agree with you, Judge. However, I no longer have a jail, two buildings burned completely to the ground, and others were heavily damaged.” The sheriff’s glare landed squarely on Fritz.

Fritz moved uneasily in his seat. “The Brokkens, of course, will extend credit to those impacted...”

“Or perhaps more,” Deborah said. “We are willing to help the

town in whatever way we can."

Sheriff Vic gave her an appreciative nod.

The judge rapped a knuckle to bring attention back to him. "The sticking point is the jailbreak. I cannot condone such activity by simply dismissing it." Each word he spoke was articulated, neatly separated, so there could be no mistaking his intention.

His gaze traveled around the room as if he assessed them individually. "The sheriff has recommended a punishment. She suggests all five of you spend a year in making amends to this community, and that is in addition to paying for all damages you have incurred. I tend to agree with her recommendation. I see no need why we must take this to trial."

Deborah reached a hand blindly to Chance, holding to his sleeve since his arms were still holding Sally Jane.

The judge finally seemed satisfied and nodded. "For one full year, you are to serve this town and community, in any way the sheriff feels necessary. In addition, full reparations must be made for all damages by March fifteenth of next year. If Sheriff English has nothing more to add, you are dismissed."

He banged his gavel again although Deborah no longer cared if he damaged the wood. No one would be going to prison. She and Lydia found each other and hugged. The men shook hands with the judge, the sheriff, and each other, except for Chance, who still held the sleeping Sally Jane.

Chapter Forty-three

Chance hoped Sally would sleep when they arrived home, but her long nap in his arms had her squirming to get down as soon as they walked in the door. He should have been happy, with the light sentence imposed by the judge, but it was still a stain, a blemish on his name.

In addition, obstacles stood in his way before he achieved complete happiness. Somehow, someway, from the moment he'd pulled Sally's hand away from Miss Edna, she'd become his daughter. Deborah said they'd find her mother and that frightened Chance. He'd not rest easy until the mother was found and questioned.

Deborah took Sally's hand, against her wishes, and led her out back, to the outhouse. Chance fired up the stove to warm the coffee still in the pot and took a seat at the table.

Deborah returned looking as if she'd wrestled a bear. Sally made a beeline to him. This time, although she attempted to climb into his lap, he did not pick her up. He stroked her long, blonde hair and worked at some of the tangles.

Deborah had attempted to brush it that morning, but Sally would have none of that. Chance knew things could not continue like this, that the little girl would be spoiled, but his heart would not allow him to show his irritability—not yet, not ever, although discipline was needed. That could wait until things became more settled. Who knew what she may have had to endure in her short life before she ever arrived in Brokken?

Still, tonight he'd get her to sleep in her own bed—somehow, someway. He glanced up to see Deborah watching him.

"Chance..."

A knock sounded on the door, and irritability crossed Deborah's face. She sighed heavily when Sheriff Vic entered with Missy.

Without a preliminary greeting, she glared at Chance who had not risen from his seat. Sally Jane still leaned against him.

"What are you doing?" she demanded.

He tilted his head. "What do you mean?"

"Men!" she murmured. "Did you read the letter I gave you?"

He'd forgotten all about it. While he pulled it out of his pocket, after moving Sally out of his way, Deborah offered to take the sheriff and Missy's coats.

Sheriff Vic shook her head. "We're not staying."

Chance read through the letter quickly and puckered his forehead, not sure what to make of it. He looked to the sheriff and attempted to speak, but she held up a hand.

"We are not discussing this. Missy has been staying with Miss Edna and has helped care for Sally." She touched the shoulder of the girl at her side.

Missy took the cue, stepped forward, and knelt. "Hey, Sally Jane. Remember me?"

Sally Jane had laid her head against Chance's leg. She now straightened and smiled. Missy motioned for her. Chance and Deborah exchanged a glance, and Chance held his breath. He suspected Deborah did also.

Sally ran to the girl and threw her arms around her neck.

Sheriff Vic looked to Chance. "If you'd read the letter, you would have known without me telling you. Now, we're taking her."

Chance's heart choked him. "No. I mean, you can make inquiries, but Sally needs to stay with us."

Sheriff Vic smiled and then frowned. "Silly man. Didn't you just read the letter?"

Chance glanced at the letter again, and his forehead smoothed. "Oh."

"Follow the instructions." She gave him another glare.

Missy stood and picked up Sally and spoke to her. "Do you want to go with me? We'll play your favorite game."

"Ride the horsey down to town?" Sally asked, and Missy nodded.

Chance feared for Sally, wanted to keep her close, to keep an eye on her, but the relief of having another person to share the load lightened his heart.

He opened his mouth to speak, but again, the sheriff held up a hand. "If we need you, we know where you are. We'll try not to need you."

Chance frowned and moved closer to the sheriff, determined to say at least one more thing. "And are you going to make inquiries as to the girl's family?" he asked quietly.

"Yes. It's the right thing to do." Her eyes held compassion for

him.

Chance nodded although his heart sank to the pit of his stomach.

"Missy and I gathered Sally's things from Miss Edna's house, as few as they were." She stepped closer to Chance, and to his surprise, wrapped her arms around him.

He held to her, as if she was a raft and him a sinking sailor. It was she who pulled away, and tears stood in her eyes before she averted her face. "Let's go, Missy."

Chance pressed a kiss to Sally's forehead, and Deborah saw them out. Chance went to stand by the window, to watch them pass by on the sidewalk, his arms aching with emptiness. The sheriff and Sally both turned their heads, spotted him, and waved happily. He was glad the window obscured him, and that they could not see the tears that fell.

He went to the bedroom and poured water in the basin, to wash his face before Deborah came back. He looked up to see her watching him.

A slow smile formed on her face. "Alone at last." She inched closer to him.

He ignored her, opened the chifforobe, and pulled out two bags. "Pack your bags."

She raised her eyebrows. "What? But we're alone. Finally." She raised her arms and wrapped them around his neck.

He untangled himself and smiled at her. "Yes, but the letter contains instructions from Sheriff Vic. We have to pack."

"For what?"

His grin widened. "Trust me."

"Trust you? That means trusting the sheriff after she tried to get Fritz sent to prison! I can't believe Vic would do that to him." Deborah was indignant.

Chance wasn't so sure Fritz didn't deserve some jail time, but now was not the time to argue.

The few clothes he had, he threw into the bag and turned to Deborah who still watched him with a puzzled expression. "I need to rent a buggy from the livery. I'll be back to pick you up. Be ready."

"Where are we going?"

He tilted her head to give her a gentle kiss. "I don't think you'll be disappointed." He smiled again and left.

CHANCE DID AS THE LETTER instructed, arriving at the hunting house at seven o'clock on the dot. He'd taken a long route in order to arrive at the exact time.

Deborah, of course, knew where they headed when they turned on the road leading to the cabin.

She squeezed his arm. "I've told you, haven't I, that this is where I want to live?"

Chance nodded. She'd mentioned it more than once.

"My brothers may not want to give it up. It's where they came to hunt and fish whenever they could."

"Who knows?" A smile played on his lips that he could not hide, but the darkness obscured it, he hoped.

Deborah gasped. "Someone is here. I thought we were going to be alone." She sighed heavily.

Two other buggies were pulled to the side of the house, and a wagon was at the front, the horses still in harness.

Chance jumped from the buggy and came around to help Deborah down. Calvin came from around the side of the house to meet them, his chest puffed out.

"I'm to take care of your horse for you," he said.

Chance suppressed a laugh. "Thank you."

Deborah and Chance walked up the steps, and both faced the door. He gave a sharp rap and put out his hand to open it.

Deborah grabbed his arm. "Wait. Whoever is in there may not want us to barge in."

"It's what the letter instructed," he said and pushed the door open.

A fire burned in the fireplace. The cabin's warmth welcomed them after the cold ride. Candles were lit and sat on the table loaded with food. Miss Abby smiled at them and removed her apron.

"I was just leaving." She hugged Deborah and gave her a kiss on the cheek.

Chance tried to speak but a lump in his throat would not let the words pass.

Abby hugged him and then held him at arm's length. "The food is courtesy of Molly and Tom, although the town pitched in. Everyone else has left, gone out the back."

She went to the front, her hand on the door, and then she turned her head. “And don’t worry. I’m taking Calvin with me.” She laughed and was gone.

Deborah wiped away the tears and sniffled. “Why would the town do this for us, after all the trouble we caused?”

Chance shrugged his shoulders and attempted to master the emotions swirling through him. Deborah moved around the cabin and emitted soft cries as she encountered each surprise.

She went into the bedroom and called out. “They even filled the tub! The water is perfect.” She came back to Chance, holding a silky gown against her. “This was laid out on the bed.” She glanced at him through her lashes.

He felt the silk fabric and smiled. “Someone must like me.”

Deborah laughed and slapped his hand away. “The note says it’s from Vic. Maybe I misjudged her—she’s always been kind to me.”

He nodded his agreement and gave his wife a grin. “Go. Everything is prepared for you. I’ll be waiting.”

She smiled shyly, her cheeks pink, and left.

Chance went to the table, and his stomach growled. He buttered a roll and ate it and then noticed a card propped up in the center of the table.

He hesitated, wondering if he should wait for Deborah to read it, but his curiosity got the best of him. The outside of the card had drawings, made by children. Inside it read,

Mr. Hale,

You have brought us from the brink of the abyss by your gallant efforts. We cannot adequately convey our appreciation in words.

Our children were saved by your actions, and it will never be forgotten. Nothing we can say or do will ever repay you, but we hope to continue to show our appreciation daily.

The town of Brokken remains unbroken due to your efforts. With God’s help, it will continue that way.

Sincerely and with our deepest gratitude,

The Citizens of Brokken

Chance was deeply touched and traced his fingers over the drawings on the front. Deborah was not mentioned or Fritz or Klint. Perhaps there was another card for Deborah, but he did not see one. He decided he’d wait to show it to her later, not sure what her reaction might be. They had the rest of their lives to talk of it.

DEBORAH CAME FROM THE bedroom, and slid her hands down the silk gown, enjoying its smoothness. Chance moved toward her, his face glowing. He took her in his arms, and her warm lips found his. He trailed kisses down her neck until she gasped and shook.

She didn't want him to stop but could not wait to tell him what else she had discovered. She put up a hand to his chest. "Wait."

"For what?" he mumbled, still kissing her.

She pushed him back, and he stopped, his eyes still smoldering.

"A copy of father's will and a deed were on the table next to the bed."

"A deed to this house?" He did not sound surprised.

"Yes. Father's will left it to me. I don't know why." She still could not believe it and searched Chance's eyes as if he could convince her all of this was real.

Chance sobered. "Your father is now known to be deceased. More than likely, the house became yours upon marriage, and Fritz must have brought the deed over, knowing we were coming here. Besides, you are a Brokken, and you deserve it. I think you love this place more than your brothers ever could have." His rich voice never failed to comfort her.

Her chest rose and fell with a sigh of happiness, and she nestled in his arms. But she didn't stay that way long. Chance scooped her up and carried her to the bedroom. The sheets were sweet smelling, and she breathed deeply.

As contentment washed over her, she raised her arms to her husband. And never had she felt so wanted, so at home, or so loved.

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Abagail lives in South Alabama with her husband, five dogs and two cats, near where her ancestors scratched a living from the ground. She is a righter of wrongs, including her own, and a peacemaker, a servant, a defender. A writer. You can connect with Abagail at the following links:

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